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OR,
THE DANDY DEAD-SHOT.

"AND SO YOU TWO ARE TOM RATTLER AND MRS. KIT BANDY, HEY?" DEMANDED YOUNG JOVE.

YOUNG JOVE,
THE DANDY DEAD-SHOT;
OR,

Old Kit Bandy's Compromise.

BY OLL COOMES.

CHAPTER I.

LOST IN THE FOG.

THE Little Dismal Desert!

It was a local name applied to a long reach of sandy plain, covered with sage-brush and sand-willows, stretching away from the foot-hills of the mountains toward the south.

For two days a thick, black fog had hung over this trackless waste making it ten-fold more dismal, and for nearly two days Ben Hall and Fred Weston had wandered about at random over that plain—under that fog—lost on the Dismal Desert!

They were both young men, Hall being about twenty-three and Weston a year or two younger. They were dressed as plainsmen and well-armed. They were not plainsmen, however, but young business men from Iowa on their way to the mountains for a summer's outing. Ben Hall had been there twice before, and, having confidence in his previous experience, they had left the railroad, purchased ponies and a general outfit, and struck out across the country by an unfrequented route that ran through the Little Dismal Desert.

All had gone well until their first night on that trackless waste. Leaving their horses saddled and bridled, for there was neither water nor grass for them, they wrapped their blankets around them and laid down to rest. When they awoke in the morning their horses with most of their outfit were gone! The fog still hung over the plain, deep and dark, and in searching for their animals they had become bewildered—lost!

If they had taken the precaution of a plainsman to follow the tracks of the ponies, they might have found them, but, expecting to find the animals near, they began groping about among the sage-brush, and ere they were aware of the fact had entirely lost their bearings.

This was deeply regretted by Ben Hall. Over at Red Notch mining-camp in the Colorado Mountains, John Kingsley, an old friend and schoolmate of Ben, was waiting his coming. Ben had written him that he would be there by a certain date, and, if not there on time, he—Kingsley—need not look for him at all, and he was now ten days behind time.

All day they wandered about, crossing and re-crossing their own tracks a dozen times, but never once those of their horses.

A second night they slept on the desert. The next morning they resumed their tramp, but hunger and thirst were beginning to tell on body and mind. All their provisions were in their saddle-bags on the backs of the ponies.

"If this fog doesn't lift soon, Fred," Ben finally observed, in a somewhat despondent tone, "the coyotes may pick our bones."

"It is very unfortunate that we didn't unsaddle those ponies," Fred responded, "for you know they never left us before even though un-hitched. We ought to have known better, but now we'll have to make the best of our blunder. It seems to me it's growing lighter; the fog may lift about noon."

"I hope so, at least," Ben added; "but it does seem strange that we should become so completely bewildered on a little sand-patch not twenty miles across in any direction. I say it is downright aggravating, and— Ah, hark!"

Ben's eager ear caught a rustling among the bushes, and stopping short they peered around them. A few rods away they saw the moving head of an animal above the bushes, which at that point were thick and tall.

"It's a riderless horse," whispered Ben Hall; "drop down! it may perchance be one of our own animals."

The horse came obliquely across their path, and when about four rods from them stopped, raised its head and sniffed the air as if it detected danger.

"My God!" involuntarily burst from Ben Hall's lips at the sight that now met their eyes.

The horse was bridleless, but upon his back was a Mexican saddle, and resting in the seat was a ghastly object—a human head with a

dark, slouch-brimmed hat upon it! The face was turned toward them, pale and bloodless. The eyes were half open and seemed to be gazing straight into the eyes of the two startled wanderers.

For only a moment did the horse stand still; then, seemingly alarmed, bounded away with its ghastly, trunkless rider into the gloom.

The two men gazed after the horse until it had disappeared, then looked into each other's faces. Fred Weston saw that his companion's was as ghastly, almost, as that in the saddle. His lips were twitching, and breathing seemed difficult. Fred was alarmed.

"Ben, you are sick!" he exclaimed; "but I do not wonder."

"Fred Weston," said Ben, in a husky voice, "as sure as there's a heaven above us, that face in the saddle is the face of my beloved friend, John Kingsley, whom we were to meet at Red Notch Camp!"

CHAPTER II.

A HORRIBLE DREAM VERIFIED.

FRED WESTON was fairly thunderstruck by Ben's declaration, and decidedly alarmed at the pallor of his face.

"Ben," he said, "that's all a mistake about that being your friend's head and face. It's nothing more than a dummy some cowboy has fixed up and sent adrift to create a sensation. The resemblance to your friend's face is merely a fancy—a coincidence."

"Fred, I hope you are right," Ben responded, with a breath of relief; "but if it's a dummy, it is horribly natural. I hope you are right. This is indeed a Dismal Desert to us."

The wandering tourists resumed their tramp. They followed the track of the strange horse, hoping that through its animal instinct they would be enabled to escape from the desert. For two hours they followed it, and then were suddenly startled by a horse galloping across their path.

It was that same horse, and in the saddle rode that same ghastly object. It was now evident to Ben and Fred that the animal itself was wandering aimlessly around over the plain.

Again Ben declared it was the face of John Kingsley in the saddle, and Fred himself began to think seriously over the matter. And the more they pondered over it, the more complicated the mystery seemed to become.

Finally they were so thoroughly worked up over the matter that they began to wonder if they were not undergoing some mental hallucination superinduced by the fog, or atmospheric influence of the Dismal Desert—if the horse was not a mere phantom of the mist.

"To settle the matter," declared Ben, finally, "I'm going to shoot the horse, if lead will kill it, when it crosses our path again!"

He had scarcely spoken when Fred touched his arm and called his attention, by a glance, to the horse coming directly toward them, but a few rods away.

Ben quickly raised his rifle and fired. He was a superb shot, and, with a groan, the horse sunk down in his tracks.

Then for a moment the two men stood stock-still, as if dreading to approach and learn the truth. But, finally, Ben Hall took the lead and they advanced to the side of the dead horse.

The animal lay upon its side. That ghastly object in the saddle lay with its face upturned, and its eyes seemed to meet those of the tourists. For a moment the latter gazed at it in silence; then, half choking, Ben Hall gasped out:

"Fred, that is John Kingsley's face! He has been murdered and his body mutilated!"

The young man grew so sick at heart that he was compelled to walk off a few paces and sit down.

Fred Weston removed the ghastly relic from the saddle-seat where it had been securely and ingeniously fastened, dug a hole in the sand with his hands and buried it.

Then, in looking about the saddle, he made a discovery: on the smooth leather saddle-flaps he saw a number of words written—evidently with some sharp-pointed instrument. He told Ben of his discovery, and read aloud to him these words:

"Who is he?—was found dead in the mountains—no marks of violence—death by heart failure—nothing about him by which to identify. In hopes of recognition I resort to this ghastly expedient. He had a little fortune in gold-dust—friends can have same on proof of right. Let him who would obtain this gold wear blue ribbon or badge in buttonhole, but ask no questions until questioned in camp or canyon. When I am satisfied I will recognize—don't talk—be careful!"

SILENT HONOR."

"Poor John Kingsley!" exclaimed Ben Hall, in tones of sorrow. "What an untimely ending of a noble and kind-hearted young man! There is not a single doubt in my mind now of its being John. I remember he told me only last summer of his having some trouble of the heart. He wrote me since then of his working in a placer that was panning out a little fortune. With his gold I presume he started alone to deposit it in some place where it would be safe—perhaps he had started home, hoping to be back by the time we reached Red Notch. This, of course, is only my theory of the matter."

"And it is a very strange coincidence," added Weston, "that we should fortunately be the first to run across the horse and recognize that face as Kingsley's when we did, for decomposition would have soon set in."

"Not in this atmosphere, Fred; the flesh would have dried up, and the person sending the head adrift must have been aware of the effect of the atmosphere of this country on dead flesh. But just why 'Silent Honor' exacts such terms—such secrecy of the friends of the deceased man, surpasses my comprehension. How is he to know that the person finding the horse and recognizing that face is a friend or relative of the dead man? The biggest scoundrel in Colorado may have known Kingsley, found all we have found, and demanded the gold should be able to find 'Silent Honor,' through the medium of a blue badge or ribbon."

"It looks to me as if the fellow, whoever he is, wants an excuse to keep the gold, even if he did not murder Kingsley to obtain it," said Fred Weston. "However, there is something so peculiarly strange—I might say, mysterious—about it as to bear investigation in the manner designated by 'Silent Honor.'"

"You are right, Fred, and who has a better right to demand John Kingsley's gold than I? not for my own use, but for his sister, Edith, of whom I have heard him often speak, but whom I have never met. She resides in Eastern Kansas with an uncle. She and John were orphans. It will be my painful duty to write her of her brother's death when we reach Red Notch, if we ever do."

Ben made a copy of the writing on the saddle, and then the two resumed their tramp.

And, now that their minds were somewhat relieved, they noticed it had grown lighter—the fog was lifting! The dim outlines of the distant mountain-range became visible, and to still add to the joy of this discovery, they came suddenly upon their own ponies with bridles, saddles and outfit intact.

Securing the animals, they made a dive into their saddle-bags for something to eat; then, mounting, they rode briskly toward the hills that were growing plainer every minute.

At length a little breeze sprung up blowing mountainward; the fog was whirled away over the hills, and the Dismal Desert became flooded with the slanting rays of the declining sun. Ben glanced back over the waste, and, as its remotest extremity could be defined by the unaided eye, a look of disgust settled upon his face as he observed:

"Fred Weston, I hope it will never get out that we were lost two days on a sand-patch whose extremities are within range of the naked eye!"

"The fog, Ben, was the cause of our trouble," answered Fred.

"Well, we'll lay it to the fog, at any rate," laughed Ben.

By the time the shadows of night had fallen, the tourists had reached the foot-hills, and gone into camp where water and grass were to be had.

They had a good night's rest, and with mind and body thus refreshed, were up and off early the next morning; and when they next went into camp on the succeeding night, it was far over in the mountains.

The second day in the hills passed without incident. At noon of the third day they stopped for dinner and rest in Black Rock Canyon, in the shadows on the west side of the defile. Behind them the bluff sloped gradually away into the sky line. Before them, on the opposite side, the bluff arose, perpendicular, to the height of five hundred feet, then dropped back into a gentle slope that was sparsely covered with bushes. A little laughing stream went gliding through the canyon.

The facade of this perpendicular wall was bristling with scrubby bushes—some living, some dead—that grew from every crack and crevice on the face of the rocky rampart, while up from the base of the cliff parasites grew, twining their long tendrils about the bushes and clinging like leeches to the bare rocks.

Ben and Fred could not help admiring the picturesque grandeur of the scene before them, and while they thus sat with their eyes uplifted to the dizzy heights, they were startled by the report of a rifle that came rebounding through the hills, followed by a yell such as they had never heard before. In an instant they were upon their feet.

"Heavens!" cried Ben, "what do you suppose that means?"

"Look! see!" exclaimed Fred.

Down the slope toward the edge of the precipice they saw the lithe figure of a white man running, while, in swift pursuit, followed a dozen howling Indians.

In an instant Ben had his tourist's glass to his eye and focused upon the fugitive.

"Fred!" he exclaimed, "that figure is a mere boy, and those red demons mean to kill him or force him over that cliff!"

"And we are powerless to aid him!" added Fred. "He surely does not know of that precipice!"

The young tourists stood as if rooted to the spot. They would quickly have gone to the boy's assistance were such a thing possible.

The red-skins were close upon him—one of them within forty feet. They saw the boy glance back over his shoulder—then stop, turn facing the foe, and swing his arm as if in the act of throwing. They saw the savage drop to the earth as if shot; then the boy ran on to the very edge of the awful escarpment. There he paused and again glanced back to the foe, then he looked over the cliff.

With a fiendish yell the savages came on, and then—horror of horrors! the boy stepped backward and shot downward over the cliff, a defiant scream trailing downward from his lips!

"Great God!" burst from Fred's lips, and he closed his eyes and covered his ears to shut out the horrible sight and sound of the falling body!

CHAPTER III.

ASTOUNDED TOURIST—DISMAYED RED SKINS.

"Good!" burst from the lips of Ben Hall, as Fred closed his eyes. "See! the boy has caught onto a bush and is hanging against the face of the cliff!"

Less than thirty feet from the edge of the precipice, the daring youth, truly enough, had fallen into a bush which, growing from a crevice in the wall, had turned upward to the sunlight. He had caught hold of the bush and there hung. He gazed upward and then downward. He saw the savages leering down upon him, and, releasing his hold, again shot downward, and again landed in a second bush twenty feet below the first; but this bush was a dead one. Its roots gradually yielded under the boy's weight, and together boy and bush went raking down the face of the cliff.

The sight was appalling, and, scarcely breathing, Ben and Fred stood with distended eyes fixed upon it.

Down and down went the boy, still clinging to the dead bush, whose stiff, rough branches raking through others retarded his descent. Vines clinging to the bushes were torn from their fastening and carried along, and soon the daring boy was almost enveloped in the mass! At times he clung like a wounded squirrel against the cliff, then breaking away would shoot downward again until arrested in his descent by another bush.

It was all of five hundred feet from the summit of the cliff, where the dismayed red-skins stood, to the bottom of the canyon, and the mad leap could have been made with no hope of escaping death below. It seemed the boy had chosen self-destruction rather than massacre at the hands of the Indians.

Yet thirty feet from the bottom of the canyon, Hall and Weston saw the boy's descent arrested by a couple of bushes growing close together. The youth was now almost wholly enveloped in a web of vines and broken boughs.

All below him was a thick green mass of bushes and parasitical vines, and it now looked as if, through the intervention of a merciful Providence, and a preternatural presence of mind, the boy would yet escape death.

The savages, too, must have entertained the same thought, for they began to drop rocks over the edge of the cliff that came crashing down the acclivity and fell with a boom in the canyon.

"I've a notion to open upon that gang of demons with my rifle!" exclaimed Ben Hall, growing indignant.

"It will be a waste of powder, Ben," said

Fred; "and besides, it might be the cause of injury to that boy—but hark!"

The sound of clattering hoofs was suddenly heard coming up the canyon.

Quickly the young tourists fell back under cover of the shrubbery, behind which their horses were tied.

A few moments later a single horseman swept into view. The upper half of his face was covered with a strip of dark cloth, with eye-holes. The lower portion bore a heavy beard. On his head was a slouched hat. In his right hand he carried a revolver. His eyes were turned toward the cliff.

At sight of the man, the tourists put him down as an outlaw—a confederate of the savages on the cliff.

At the base of the great acclivity he drew rein and looked up and down the heights, and then peered into the bushes along their base. He appeared to be looking for the boy, but the youth was not to be seen. He had disappeared from sight, where he had last lodged, as completely as if dissolved into thin air, or had crept into a crevice of the rocky wall.

"He's looking for the mangled corpse of that boy!" decided Fred.

"I don't think he'll find anything dead there; but where could the boy have gone? He must be a sort of a human bat."

"He must be on a ledge behind the bushes and vines. Did ever mortal man escape death so miraculously?"

"The boy's not safe yet, Fred, but I mean to hold myself in readiness to do some shooting in his behalf, if necessary."

The masked horseman raised his revolver, finally, and discharged it into the bushes up near where the boy had disappeared. Twice he repeated the shot, but the only response elicited was the reverberating echoes of his pistol's report.

Finally he rode close in to the foot of the cliff and dismounted, and, leaving his horse standing unhitched, waded in among the bushes and vines as if to make sure the body of the boy was not there.

He was not over twenty paces from his horse when Ben and Fred were startled by sight of the boy appearing on a ledge just back of, and a little above, the animal.

It looked as if the final crisis in the thrilling adventure of the desperate lad was soon to be enacted, and grasping his rifle Ben Hall decided that his time for action in behalf of the youth had come. He took a step forward but, as quickly stepped backward, an exclamation escaping his lips. He saw the boy leap from the ledge with a spring like a panther down upon the horse's back, his feet landing squarely in the saddle, and, as the horse bounded away with a frightened, the daring, nimble fellow dropped astride the animal's back!

Straight across the canyon toward the tourists the frightened animal bore the new rider, and after him, afoot, sped the outwitted outlaw, firing with his revolver and calling to the youth to halt. But he might as well have tried to halt a wild mustang.

Seeing the boy had at last escaped death, and not wishing to encounter the outlaw, Ben and Fred hastened to their horses, sprung into the saddles, and, instead of riding back into Black Rock Canyon, dashed away up the defile in the mouth of which their horses had been resting.

They had not ridden far before the fleet-footed horse ridden by the lad was alongside of them, and their ears were greeted with the exclamation:

"Hello, here, pard! Here we go together!"

Ben and Fred glanced at the speaker's face. It was the face of a boy, indeed—cut, scratched and covered with blood. He could not have been over eighteen years of age, and was small even for that age, but slender, supple and wiry as a young panther. His head was bare, having lost his hat in his descent of the cliff, and his long, brown hair was flying in disorder about his brow. There was a grim smile on his bleeding face, while from his dark-gray eyes there gleamed a light indicative of a wild, fearless young spirit.

"Yes, we ride together," responded Ben to the boy's greeting, "and I hope your troubles are at an end!"

"Did you folks see me take that tumble?" the youth asked, his face aglow with a triumphant smile.

"We saw it all, boy," Ben replied; "it was one of the most daring and reckless feats I ever witnessed. Surely you didn't expect to come out alive?"

"Didn't, eh?" responded the youth, with a merry twinkle of the eye; "well, I made up my

mind them red-skins'd never lift my silken tresses, and just took my chances. I knowed all 'bout them bushes and vines. I guess I got scratched a little, and my beauty bled up some, but it's worth all I passed through just to beat that hairy renegade out of his boss. Holy mist! I tell ye the critter's a airy-footed gee-whizzer, and beats walkin' all holler. Ha! ha! ha! that outfit'll not get the chance to baboon with Little Jove soon again, I'll bet!"

"Say!" interrupted Ben Hall, "do you mean to tell me you are that young mountain thunderbolt I heard so much about last summer up at Red Notch Camp?"

"I don't know what you heard at Red Notch, stranger," the boy replied, "but I am the freckled kid they call Little Jove."

"By gracious! boy, give me your hand!" exclaimed Hall; "we'll bear witness that you are a Mountain Thunderbolt, and a daring young whirlwind into the bargain!"

CHAPTER IV.

OVER THE HILLS WITH LITTLE JOVE.

BEN HALL and Fred Weston felt a sense of relief as well as pleasure when they found themselves in the company of Little Jove, the Young Thunderbolt.

On his previous visit to Red Notch, Ben had heard much of the exploits of this boy, and while, at the time, he was disposed to discredit those stories, he was now ready to bear witness to the fact of having seen him perform a feat more marvelous and thrilling than any of those he had heard narrated.

As the three galloped on up the defile, an animated conversation was carried on, though never for a minute did Jove seem to relax his watch upon the hills around them.

"I presume you expect to be pursued?" Ben finally observed.

"Yes; but them plungers are all afoot now," he answered; "and they'll have some lively shankin' to do if they git a swat at me soon again. Oh, great horned dragons! won't that old renegade dance a demon's hornpipe when he gets tired walkin'? Boys, I tell you this is a Susie Ellen of a hoss, and I'll bet cents to dollars that wombat stole it from some rancher."

"Are the Indians on the war-path, Jove?" Fred asked.

"Not the Reservation reds; but there are gangs of outlaw red-skins, as well as white-skins, lummixin' 'bout in the hills robbin' stages, stealin' hosses and killin' weak, defenseless parties. It's a wild wonder they didn't swat you fellers."

"They were too busy with you," responded Fred, with a smile.

"Confound their hides, I'll be a mouse in a sewin' circle to them, as Old Father Runkells used to say, if they don't let me alone."

"Don't you carry any weapons, Jove?"

"See that?" he responded, displaying a hand-some little revolver which he drew from the bosom of his buckskin overshirt; "I can't miss a gnat's eye-winker at ten paces with that little spitfire. And do you see that?"—displaying an irregular-shaped stone about one-third the size of his fist—"that's the kind of a weapon that suits me best. I'll throw stones ag'inst any revolver-shot between Jimtown and Yuba Dam. I wish you could 'a' seen me swat one of them Ingins while we war tearin' down the hill today."

"We saw it!" exclaimed Ben, "or, at least, we saw you swing your arm, and saw the red-skin fall. You did that with a stone?"

"With a stone, and splattered his nose all over his face," Jove responded. "I've downed many a deer with a dornick, and can swat the bull's-eye nine out of ten. 'Cause I war good at hurlin' stones, Old Dad Runkells called me Jove, after an old codger that lived over on some mountain and used to throw thunderbolts at Indians and b'ars. But I had a rifle with me today, and when I seen the smokies a-comin' I hid it and lined out for the cliff."

"Where do you live, Jove?"

"Anywhere—everywhere," was the answer. "Hav'n't you any friends—I mean relatives?"

"Billions of friends, but no relatives that I can find."

"How in the world does it come you are here in the mountains?"

"It's jist this way, pard," he explained: "Years ago Joe Runkells was a hunter and trapper over on the South Fork of the Platte. One mornin' he woke to find a canoe driftin' down the river past his cabin door. In it war a kickin', screamin' young painter. Old Joe haul'd the boat ashore, took the young painter into his bungalow, doped it with grub, give it a revolver

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to play with, and soon had the critter tame as a kitten. He got attached to it and kept it, for nobody ever come to claim it.

"Years went flirtin' by, and the little painter growed and growed, and finally begun to paint. It loved Old Joe, and Old Joe loved it. When the painter was fifteen years old poor Old Joe died, and the painter took to the hills and 's been paintin' away ever since. I'm that painter, boys, and that's who, what, which and where I be.

"You see, I don't know much 'bout who I am, but Old Joe told me some things 'bout the kid in the canoe by which I could explain matters if ever anybody come along huntin' a lost boy. I think, and so'd Old Joe, that the beastly Ingins made me a homeless wanderer; but, whether that be so or not, I've made a few of them wander home with smashed mugs.

"But, pards, I'm havin' lots of fun one way and another, and if you'd just stay with me one lone summer we'd have holy swads of frolic. There's not much huntin' down here now, but if we'd go up into the higher mountains we could have a whalin' old time. You see, at this season the bears, and painters, and deer, and sheep all go up to the timber-line to raise their young where there's no flies or guns to pester them. Oh! if you want sloshin' fun, the time to hunt grizzlies and painters is when they've got their young. They'll fight then like koodles and give a feller the odds every time. But, pards, what possessed you to come up this defile, anyhow?"

"We were nooning in the entrance to this defile, and come this way to elude discovery by your 'plungers!'" Ben answered.

"Goin' over to Red Notch?"

"We are."

"Then this defile 'll take you forty-'leven miles out of your way. It leads clear over into the land of Nod."

"And is there no way getting back to Black Rock Canyon without retracing our steps, and running the risk of meeting those red-skins?"

"Yes, by cuttin' across lots; but there's a steep ole hill to climb up and another to climb down. We can make it by diggin' in our toes goin' up, and rakin' back on our dew-claws goin' down. I've made it more'n once."

"Well, Jove, as you can see, we are not mountaineers, and if you'll guide us across and back to Black Rock, the favor will be substantially rewarded!"

"I'll do it with smiles!" the boy said, "for I want to get back into Black Rock myself. I promised some folks I'd keep a watch on the movements of the plungers along Black Rock."

Thus they rode on for some five or six miles when they turned to the right and began the ascent of a long, rocky slope, and by the time they had reached the summit, crossed to the opposite side, and descended into the pass beyond, night had set in; and as the valley was wooded with pine and cedar, it was extremely dark and difficult traveling.

They would have gone into camp could water and grass been had for their animals, but Little Jove said they would have to ride further before either grass or water could be found.

But the young guide did not say just how far it was, and when the goal was finally reached, it was nearly midnight, and they found themselves at the edge of Black Rock Canyon, not over five miles from the point where the tourists had left it!

Ben and Fred were feeling somewhat the worse for their long, hard ride, and when at length they thought the hour for rest had come, Little Jove dispelled their hopes by informing them that he meant to leave for a few hours, and make a trip down Black Rock Canyon in hopes of recovering his rifle and cap.

Of course, the others could make no objections, and the boy, after cautioning them to be sharply on their guard, took his departure. Ben agreed to take the first watch, and Fred rolled himself in his blanket and was soon sound asleep. In due time they changed positions, and all too soon did the night pass and daylight flood hill and canyon. But, worst of all, Little Jove had not yet returned, and they were afraid that his recklessness had got him into some new danger. At any rate, they could not think of resuming their journey before he came back, or, at least, had had plenty time in which to make his trip. So they settled down to wait.

Two hours of precious time thus passed. Ben Hall grew impatient. He walked out into the canyon. Its gloom was in keeping with his own thoughts. The Dismal Desert and the face of

his friend, John Kingsley, came up before his mental vision. He walked on down the canyon, thinking nothing of danger.

Suddenly the sound of footsteps fell upon his ears. He turned to find himself confronted by two villainous-looking ruffians, the click of whose revolvers was accompanied by the command:

"Throw up your hands, or die!"

CHAPTER V. A LIVELY CAMP.

BEN HALL was in no sense cowardly, nor was he a rash hot-head. He was satisfied that the men confronting him were outlaws. They had the drop on him and resistance would be certain death; so he raised his hands as commanded.

One of the bearded scoundrels advanced and disarmed him, and then said:

"Come, now, with us."

"Strangers," demanded Ben, "what am I to understand by this treatment?"

"Come right along and ax no questions," was the unsatisfactory answer, given in no gentle tones.

Ben quietly walked away with them, a faint hope in his breast that Fred, or Little Jove, might discover the predicament into which he had blundered, and effect his release.

Down the canyon the villains hurried him for about a mile, and then turned aside into a big-mouthed rift, pushed through a dense growth of bushes and emerged into the outlaws' camp.

Their coming was greeted by four wicked-looking Indians, at sight of whom a cold shudder passed through Ben's body. The young man quickly discovered, also, that he was not the only prisoner in the camp; an old man dressed in the garb of a hunter sat a little to one side, his hands tied together with one end of a lariat, the other being fastened to a tree.

The Indians gave utterance to an ejaculation of surprise, while a look of savage delight overspread their hideous faces.

The old hunter glanced up at Ben and exclaimed:

"Hullo, stranger! you're into the gravy, too, eh?"

Before Ben could respond, the sound of hoofs was heard beyond the bushes, coming up the canyon.

Leaving their prisoners in charge of the red-skins, the two white outlaws rushed away, in hopes, no doubt, of securing another victim; and, a few moments later, the shrill, sharp voice of a female was heard to ring out in angry protest, and was followed by a loud, brutal laugh from the lips of the ruffians.

Then a war of words followed, and, as the wrangling voices were approaching, the querulous voice of the stranger was heard to pipe out:

"Please, gentlemen, I am Sabina Ellen Bandy, the lawfully-wedded wife of Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective and fraud! He deserted my bed and board illegally, unlawfully and without cause or provocation, so help me! and I am ridin' through these horrid hills in search of the old villain!"

"Madam," said one of the outlaws, "your search is soon to be rewarded, for your recreant ole hubby, Kit Bandy, is a prisoner in our camp right here."

When he heard this remark, Ben glanced at the old man, whose face he saw light up with a grim smile. He had heard of Kit Bandy. Was the old man, indeed, the noted Mountain Detective?

The outlaws finally returned, leading an ancient-looking mule upon which was seated a woman far from youthful in appearance. She was clad in a well-worn dress of blue calico, a faded summer shawl, and an old sun-bonnet with broken stays that almost concealed her wrinkled, anger-distorted face.

With an ease remarkable for one of her years, the old woman leaped to the ground as they entered the camp, and swept the faces of those before her with a quick, sharp eye.

"Madam," said one of the desperadoes, pointing to the old man, "do you not recognize in this gentleman your long-lost, stolen or strayed husband?"

"Merciful Father!" exclaimed the old woman, with a disdainful toss of her head, pointing a long, bony finger at the prisoner, "that little weazin'-faced, sun-dried, Roman-nosed mummy *my* husband? No! I married a *man*, mockers of female helplessness—revilers of old age!"

A laugh burst from the outlaws' lips, and even the old man was observed to smile.

"Oh! you may all laugh to your hearts' content!" Old Sabina fairly hissed from the dark

depths of her bonnet; "no respect can be expected from such cattle as you that make war on female weemin and old men in their dotege! Such men as you war not made in the mold of the brave and decent!"

The outlaws enjoyed the old woman's rantings immensely, and so indulged her in the freedom of the camp as well as in the use of her sharp, cutting tongue.

Finally, she deliberately snatched a knife from an Indian's girdle, and stooping, coolly severed the old prisoner's bonds, saying:

"Let the old man go on his way that he may git 'round home in time to see his youngest great grand-children afore they die of old age!"

"Old lady!" exclaimed one of the outlaws stepping forward, "you don't want to get too meddlesome or you'll git the rope clapped onto your paws. That ole scoundrel's not as anti-luvian but what he war able to kill one o' our men, and send three others to the shop for repairs before we could down him! He's the wildcatness of three ginerations tied up in his ole wrinkled, sun-dried hide!"

As the old hunter made no attempt to take advantage of his liberty, but sat quietly wringing his numbed fingers, he was not rebound.

Quietly Ben Hall had taken in the whole performance, somewhat amazed at the audacity of the old woman. But he was soon to come in for a share of attention. The red-skin who stood guarding him caught sight of his watch-chain and at once took possession of the timer. Then his covetous eyes fell upon a little golden three-linked badge on the lapel of his vest and proceeded to appropriate that, also.

But, this was more than Ben could stand, and with a well-directed blow of the fist he knocked the savage down, landing him ten feet away.

It was a rash act, but Ben did not stop to count the cost.

The savage arose to his feet, half-dazed, the blood pouring from his nose. Releasing his tomahawk he advanced to wreak a terrible revenge on the young man, but again he went down to stay down for a while, at least.

But, it was not Ben Hall who struck the blow this time. It was dealt by an unseen hand! All heard the blow, and saw the red-skin fall, with a horrible gash in his face!

A look of consternation was upon the faces of the prisoners, as well as their captors. The very silence that followed was an unspoken query:

"Whence had come that silent, deadly blow?"

Old Sabina was the first to speak. Unwittingly she exclaimed, in a tragic voice:

"The vengeance of God! a silent thunderbolt from Heaven!"

"Little Jove! the Boy Devil!" instantly burst from the lips of an outlaw on hearing the word "thunderbolt."

"Thunderbolt! Thunderbolt!" burst from the lips of the red-skins, and, like hounds freed of the leash, they darted away into the bushes in search of the silent slayer!

CHAPTER VI. A DESPERATE BATTLE.

THAT the red-skin had been stricken down by a stone hurled by the unerring arm of Little Jove, was as evident now to Ben Hall as to the red-skins, and the excitement created by the mention of the youthful mountaineer's name, convinced the tourist that he was a living and dreaded menace to the lives and comfort of the brigands of the hills.

Fairly wild with the spirit of vengeance the three Indians rushed off, leaving their two white confederates with the prisoners. The outlaws, realizing the danger of the situation, called to them to come back; nor were their fears without reason.

In an instant "the concentrated wildcatness of three generations" asserted itself, for the old man in buckskin sprung to his feet and landed upon an outlaw with the fury of a madman, while Sabina Bandy, with a scream like that of a panther, leaped upon the back of the other desperado, and, throwing her arms about his neck with the grip of a boa-constrictor, bore him to the ground.

As the outlaw went down he threw up his revolver and endeavored to shoot the tigress, but Ben Hall deftly wrenched the weapon from his hand.

This row recalled the three excited red-skins, but they did not return alone, for Fred Weston and Little Jove were at their heels!

Then a short, sharp, deadly conflict ensued. A shot from Ben Hall's revolver settled Old Sabina's antagonist. The old hunter downed his man with a cracked skull. A savage collapsed at the hand of Little Jove, when the other

two took to their heels and gained the cover of the woods, both severely wounded.

The whites were in possession of the camp, but their victory had not been a bloodless one. Fred Weston lay unconscious and bleeding from a wound on the head. A bullet had grazed Old Sabina's scalp, and it was bleeding freely. The old hunter had received a flesh wound. Only Ben and Little Jove had come out of the fight unharmed.

Sabina Bandy took off her bonnet and bound a handkerchief around her bleeding head. Little Jove tied a bandage around the wounded arm of the old hunter, while Ben Hall knelt by the prostrate form of Fred Weston.

When Sabina had tied up her head and replaced her bonnet, she turned to the man in buckskin and exclaimed:

"Old Tom Rattler! wildcats of three generations, shake!"

"By the great Rosycrusians! Mrs. Bandy, you're the same ole whirlwind in petticoats, and the Red River Epidemic greets you with joy and a blamed sore arm!"

"You ole tads seem to know each other," observed Little Jove, approaching the old pair.

"Yes, we've met before, we have," averred Sabina.

"Well, for ole folks you fight like a brace of tigers up in the timber-belt," the boy added. "I never saw an ole woman whizz about so like a belted hornet. And so, you two are Tom Rattler and Mrs. Kit Bandy, hey?" demanded Little Jove.

"Them's me, boy!" answered Tom, "and right now I want to say you're a lilly-lipped hummer o' a thunderbolt, for a kid. You plunked that dornick into that red-skin's mug to a dot. I tell ye this gang o' cut-throats run 'ginst a holy circumstance, didn't they? They took me in for that old rip-snorter, Kit Bandy, and—"

"Holy mist!" exclaimed Jove, "it's a good thing you wasn't Old Kit or you'd been roasted between two fires!"

"Say, you little brat!" exclaimed Sabina, turning indignantly upon the boy, "don't drap any insinuations 'round here 'r you'll git slapped to sleep!"

"Beg pardon, grandma!" Jove said, apologetically; "but to tell you the honest truth, I don't believe you are any more a woman than I am a grizzly b'ar."

"You don't, eh? Well, I wonder what I am? a tigress? a hyena? a bird o' paradise? a—"

"No, a man!" interrupted the boy.

Tom and Sabina both laughed.

"Boy, you're the first stranger that ever penetrated my disguise as a female character," said Sabina, and in a moment off went bonnet, shawl and dress, and the lithe figure of Ichabod Flea stood before them, clad in a neat suit of gray jeans!

At this moment an exclamation from Ben Hall's lips called attention to where he was bending over the form of Fred Weston.

"Stranger," asked Old Tom, "is he badly hurt?"

"I'm afraid poor Fred has been mortally wounded," answered Ben; "he is unconscious from a terrible blow on the head."

Old Rattler looked at the wound and shook his head, saying:

"I've see'd many like it, stranger; some got well and some pegged out. There might be one chance in ten if he could have proper treatment before inflammation sets in. Ichabod, what's your opinion?"

"Same as yours," answered Flea; "a doctor can't be got short of Red Notch. He might live to get there if you start at once, and one of us go on ahead and have the doctor come and meet you. Say the word, and my mule and I'll get to the camp on the antelope run. I'm on my way there, anyhow."

"Go, Ichabod!" urged Old Tom, "and bring a doctor and some kind o' an ambulance. We'll meet the outfit somewhar up the big canyon if the cussed red-rinds and outlaws don't git away with us all."

Ichabod mounted his mule and started for Red Notch.

A litter was constructed of poles and Indian blankets and the insensible man was placed thereon.

Little Jove carried Tom's rifle, which he had recovered, and a couple of other guns captured from the enemy. Ben and Tom grasped the litter and the march began.

Up at the point where the tourists had spent a part of the night they halted until their horses could be secured. These Little Jove took in charge, and then the journey was resumed.

Occasionally they stopped by the stream that

flowed through the valley and bathed the wounded man's face and moistened his feverish lips with the cool liquid. Still he remained unconscious, and as the hours passed a strange pallor settled upon his face and his feeble moanings ceased.

The symptoms were alarming. They placed the litter upon the ground, and Ben examined his friend's pulse. He could feel no movement. He placed his hand over his heart. It had ceased to beat!

"My God!" burst in agony from young Hall's lips; "poor Fred Weston is dead! Oh, my friend—my friend!" he moaned in his poignant distress.

CHAPTER VII.

A SOLEMN SCENE.

BEN HALL'S heart was wrung with anguish and tears filled his eyes as he continued kneeling by the lifeless body of his boyhood comrade.

Finally he arose to his feet, covered the motionless form with a blanket, and began pacing to and fro in speechless grief. Old Tom and Little Jove stood silent and sorrowful and gazed around them with misty eyes.

What a sad ending to what was looked forward to as a season of pleasure! Fred Weston dead! John Kingsley dead! and it was for Ben to break the awful news to the friends of each.

Finally Old Tom approached Ben and said:

"Pard, it's best not to tarry too long: what shall we do?"

"My friend must be buried; but how are we to dig a grave?" Ben asked, his voice half-choked.

Little Jove heard the young man's query and spoke:

"Ben, I know where there's a pick and shovel not far from here that some prospectors lost or left. I hid them away, and will go and bring them."

The boy at once departed. Old Tom kept a lookout for enemies, and Ben watched by the body of his friend.

In an hour Jove returned with the pick and spade, and they began the task of digging a grave in the arid, stony earth.

The spot selected for the grave was in a little opening among some bushes that grew at the base of a great, rugged, frowning bluff on the west side of the canyon.

While Old Tom and Ben were digging, Little Jove was on the watch for danger.

Faithfully the two men worked with pick and shovel, and it was growing dusk when a grave but three feet deep was completed ready for the body.

Rattler carefully wrapped the blanket around the form, for that was all the coffin it was to have.

Tenderly they lowered the body into the grave, then, as Old Tom took up the spade, Ben said:

"Poor Fred! He little dreamed of a grave in the lonely mountains, and that, too, without Christian service—no song—no prayer—"

His words were cut short by a sound that startled both him and the old hunter. It was the sound of a voice singing in a low, tender strain that might have come from the lips of an invisible angel!

The two men glanced around them. In the twilight shadows, at the edge of the bushes before them, they beheld two dark-robed forms standing. One was a small, lithe form, the other a head taller and broad-shouldered. The faces of both were veiled.

From the lips of the slender figure were issuing those sweet strains of music in which the deep, soft base of the other was mingled as they tenderly syllabled in the sweetest melody the beautiful hymn:

"Nearer my God to Thee! nearer to Thee!"

Instinctively Ben Hall and Old Tom Rattler bared their heads and stood as if rooted to the spot, their breasts filled with profound emotion, and their minds wandering in the vagueness of a dream.

It was a strange, solemn, impressive scene. The rugged, frowning acclivity, the open grave with its silent tenant, the mysterious robed figures, the uncovered and bowed heads of the two men—all enveloped in the deepening twilight shadows, and pervaded by no sound save the low, plaintive singing of the unknown.

Motionless Ben and Old Tom Rattler stood until the last note had fallen from the hooded singers' lips; and then, when they saw the robed figures kneel down, they, too, knelt as if under the mesmeric influence of an invisible power.

In a tone that was scarcely audible, the two men heard a deep and earnest prayer offered up to the Giver of Life in behalf of the dead and the sorrowing friends, by the robed figure. It was a prayer so fervent, so touching, that it evoked a fervent "Amen" from the lips of Tom Rattler.

When he had finished his prayer, the stranger arose, and advancing to the side of the open grave, and extending his hand, said, as he dropped from his fingers a few ounces of dirt into the grave:

"Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes; Amen!" and turning to Tom and Ben continued: "Strangers, may God be with you in your troubles and your perils!"

Having thus spoken, he turned and disappeared in the shadows of the bushes, his companion following; but as the latter turned, the veil that concealed the face was caught on a twig and was drawn aside, and despite the gathering gloom, both men saw the profile of a face against a dark background—a face white as marble and perfect in its youthful beauty—the face of a young girl!

An instant it was gone from sight, but not from the memory of those two dumfounded men.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Tom, in a tone that almost sounded profane in that hallowed silence; "is this all a fact? or are we dreamin', Ben?"

Ben Hall brushed his hand across his brow, replaced his hat upon his head, and in a voice that indicated deep emotion, replied:

"Surely we are not dreaming? It must be reality."

"It 'pears mysterious, pard," Old Tom said, "but we both saw them; it's stern reality."

"Where, Tom, is to be the end of—"

He did not finish the sentence, for at this moment Little Jove came running to where they stood, and excitedly exclaimed:

"Run, men! to your horses! A hull regiment o' outlaws and Ingins are comin' lickety-brindle, and all on hossback!"

The thunder of the horses' hoofs could be plainly heard, and Old Tom, dropping the spade, exclaimed:

"Come, Ben! They won't hurt the body of your dead friend!"

Ben was reluctant to leave the grave unfilled, but his own life depended upon immediate flight.

In a few moments the three were in the saddle, Tom mounted upon Weston's horse and Little Jove upon the one he had captured from the renegade.

When they dashed away, the outlaws were in sight, and a demoniac yell from the freebooters' lips announced that the chase was on.

With Little Jove to lead, the pursued men were enabled to make good speed and easily kept beyond reach of the foe, and the darker it grew the more favorable it was for the fugitives.

But the enemy were determined. They had suffered so severely the past two days at the hands of Little Jove and his friends that they had massed their forces and set out, resolved upon forever ridding their haunts of that pestiferous boy and his associates.

The chase continued until past midnight, when the three were met by Ichabod Flea, a doctor, and a score of armed miners on the way down the canyon.

Quickly the party formed to receive the outlaws, and one broadside from a score of rifles sent the murderous gang flying away down into the hills, and the pursuit had ended.

The party turned about and wended their way back to Red Notch, where they arrived at daylight.

In dismounting from his horse in front of the hotel, Ben Hall fell to the ground, overcome with sheer exhaustion. He was carried into the hotel and put to bed, and soon after became wholly unconscious.

The doctor was sent for, and after learning the cause of his prostration—the strain through which he had passed—the man of medicine said:

"He's in a bad shape, and if brain fever doesn't result I'll be happily surprised."

And the doctor was right. For three weeks Ben Hall kept to his bed, and it was two more weeks after he was up before he had regained his wonted strength. But, through all his sickness, true-hearted Old Tom Rattler remained at his bedside, a splendid nurse and cheerful companion.

Little Jove came around every few days to see him, and from him Ben learned that Fred Weston's grave had been filled by some one, and the place carefully marked. When he heard this, his mind at once reverted to those mys-

Old Kit Bandy's Compromise.

terious people who had officiated at the burial on that memorable evening in Black Rock Canyon.

Soon after having been taken sick, Ben had written Edith Kingsley of her brother's death and had anxiously awaited a reply, but not a line or word did he receive. While he thought this silence strange, he did not for a moment forego the resolution to make a search for "Silent Honor," procure John Kingsley's gold, and give it to his sister, if such a thing were possible.

So, as soon as he was able to go about, he put a blue badge—a tiny blue ribbon—on the lapel of his coat and started out on his mission in Red Notch. He made it a point to meet every man in camp; but not a man recognized the badge! If "Silent Honor" was in Red Notch, he had, upon reflection, concluded to remain silent.

But, nothing daunted, Ben resolved to prosecute his search in other camps.

CHAPTER VIII.

EXCITEMENT IN COMPROMISE CAMP.

A LIGHT spring wagon with a canopy top, three seats, and drawn by a span of sorrel mules, was rattling along Neutral Creek in the direction of Camp Compromise, late in the afternoon of an early September day. It was the mail-hack running between Rocky Run mining-camp, by way of Compromise Camp, and a point sixty miles south.

In the vehicle were two men—the driver and a passenger. The former was known as Star-Route Sam, a man of fifty, with something of a reputation as a story-teller, and who boasted of the distinction of having been held up more times by road-agents than any mail-route Jehu in the West.

Sam's passenger occupied the middle seat and was bound for Compromise Camp. He was a man well along in years, tall and angular with short-cropped beard and long iron-gray hair. He was dressed in a suit of black that was glossy and almost threadbare from long-continued service. His coat was a Prince Albert in style, and his hat a narrow-rimmed derby, sweat-stained around the band. A pair of gold-bowed spectacles with big lenses strided his nose and gave him a sort of wise and judicial appearance.

As the hack swept around the spur of a ridge impinging upon the valley, Camp Compromise appeared in sight about two miles before them.

"There, judge!" exclaimed Star-Route Sam, pointing with his whip, "behold the famous Camp Compromise!"

"Just so," responded the old passenger who had given Sam his name as Judge Jerry Sampson Trump, of Leadville; "I am glad to see it so near. Quite a fine location, but I wonder why they called it Compromise?"

"Didn't you ever hear the history o' that place, judge?" Sam asked in apparent surprise.

"Never!" was the judge's assurance.

"Wal, I'll be darned! I thought everybody'd heard it, but I tell ye it's a good one. Do you see that rip in the mountains comin' down from the nor'west? and another comin' down from the nor'east?"

The judge answered in the affirmative.

"Wal," Sam went on, "Hat Creek runs down the one and Bonnet Creek the other. They meet just where the camp is and form Neutral Creek. It was two years ago that Jim Kelly and a party of some twenty men struck the headwaters of Bonnet Creek and follered down the stream on a prospectin' tramp. 'Bout the same time Jack Game and a party struck the headwaters of Hat Creek and came down that run on the same business. Neither party knowed of the other's presence until they come together where the two creeks unite. Now, it so happened that each party struck pay dirt in sight of each other on the two streams."

"Claims war at once located and a spirit of rivalry at once sprung up between the two parties, and as they war mostly ready for a row, it grew into hostilities. The Bonnet Creekers never lost an opportunity to throw out insults and challenges to the Hat Creekers. The latter called the other's camp Sodom, and they retaliated by calling the other camp Gomorrah, and by them names they settled down to business.

"Other miners and bums come in and took up with whichever side they thought would pay the best, or war the toughest. Their numerical strength kept 'bout even, and the rivalry and animosities grew accordin'.

"Pistol and rifle practice on each other's anatomy war occasionally indulged in. Broken heads war al'ers on tap. A Bonnet Creek didn't dast set a light near his winder or a Hat Creek'd

shoot it out; and if a Hat Creek got so stuck up as to wash his shirt and hang it out to dry, the Bonnet Creekers'd fill it so full of holes it wouldn't hold graybacks.

"Although the business didn't warrant the expense, each side had to have a saloon of its own. They couldn't fraternize even in one saloon without a funeral or two next day. It wasn't spite nor revenge that actuated them, but pure unadulterated cussedness—old royal, high-jink fun, they called it.

"One Sunday a Gomorriite went down to the creek to take a bath. That war more than Sodom could tolerate, and they rushed down on the man in a body determined to punish him for his vanity. Gomorri was aroused and swooped down to meet their rivals. A general free-for-all fight was soon ragin' in the creek and on the banks; and while they war thus engaged 'bout forty Ingins sailed down from the hills and perced to wipe out the hull caboodle.

"The result was the fool miners quit fightin' each other and made common cause 'gainst the red-skins and licked them out; but a dozen or more war killed or wounded before the fight was over.

"That Ingins attack was an eye-opener to the two camps, and they finally agreed to bury the hatchet and their dead, and call a meeting to organize for mutual protection 'ginst the red-skins and Mountain Sharks—the latter bein' a gang of outlaws that had been layin' heavy tribute on isolated camps.

"The meetin' war held, and Compromise agreed on as the name of the camp. Jack Game war elected mayor, and that's no better man in Colorado than that same 'High Jack,' as he's sometimes called. Jack war a Hat Creeker, so one Bob Mason, a Bonnet Creeker, was elected marshal, so's to even up.

"Then they must have a City Hall, and up went a big, long, log buildin' on the point between the two creeks. Next they had a post-office established. That's located in the City Hall, and is run by Pat Shinn, a jolly Irishman, who lost his leg in the fight with the Ingins.

"But, judge, in spite o' all this, that spirit o' rivalry still exists, though in a mild and harmless way. If a new-comer drops down on the camp and stops with the Bonnet Creekers, their boast of superior hospitality will be heard for a week. Oh, I tell you they're a picturesque gang as ever you struck, and—Whoa! Want to ride, Billy?"

The last words were addressed to a little old miner who came out of the bushes with a gun on his shoulder. He was one of the unique characters of Compromise Camp, who preferred a gun to a pick or shovel, and a drink of "brain-fog" to a cup of water.

"If you please, Sam'l, I'll ride with you," he replied, and climbed into the seat with the driver.

"Billy, this is Judge Trump, of Leadville," said Sam, introducing the men; "he's a candidate for Congress and 's goin' to make a speech in Compromise to-night."

"Bully for you, judge!" exclaimed Billy, extending his hand to the old, spectacled passenger; "by Joe! Compromise's havin' a 'way-up boom with big guns nowadays."

"Why? somebody at the camp?" asked Sam.

"I should lament there war," answered the miner; "yesterday there war two arrivals. One was a young feiler, handsome and stylish, and his name's John Chilton. The other's a tall man and 'bout sixty years old, and he's a hummer, I tell ye! They're both stoppin' with the Bonnet Creekers and them blamed fools are fairly wild, and 've been yellin' across to us Hat Creekers to trump their big card. By Joe! if the judge here'll stop on our side, we'll trump 'em, sure! But who d'ye suppose their guest—the ole long, lank one is?"

"Couldn't guess in a month o' Sundays?" answered Sam.

"No one," answered Billy, "but the great Mountain Deetective, Old Kit Bandy!"

"Jee-rusalem! you don't say?" exclaimed Sam.

"Who did you say it was?" asked Judge Trump, leaning forward in his seat, eager to hear aright.

"Kit Bandy, the great Mountain Deetective!" repeated Billy.

"Umph! I shall be glad to meet him." And the judge dropped back into his seat, a smile upon his face.

CHAPTER IX.

JUDGE TRUMP SPEAKS.

JUDGE Jerry Sampson Trump stopped on the Hat Creek side of Compromise, the guest of Mayor Jack Game.

The news of his arrival, of his being a candidate for Congress, and that he was to speak that night in the City Hall ran like wild-fire through the camp.

In less than an hour the judge had shaken hands with every man in the place. All Bonnet Creek rushed over to the mayor's cabin to see the candidate and get a swig of Hat Creek "brain fog" at his expense. They brought along their guests, John Chilton, and the noted old detective, Kit Bandy, both of whom were introduced to Trump.

Old Kit was already feeling pretty joyful in consequence of the hospitality of the Bonnet Creekers, and, grasping the judge's hand, exclaimed:

"Jedge, I'm delighted to meet you, and shake your judicial paw."

"Thanks, Mr. Bandy; you honor me," the judge responded.

After the reception at the mayor's cabin was over, arrangements were made for the speaking at the City Hall.

Mayor Game escorted the judge to the place of meeting shortly after the lights were lit. They found the entire camp assembled there in the best of spirits, and some with the poorest spirits in them. Kit Bandy and one Mike Crogan were decidedly mellow and overflowing with exuberance of spirit.

Mayor Game, by virtue of his official position, presided, and in a neat little speech introduced Judge Trump, who, rising, said:

"Mr. Chairman, and miners of Compromise Camp:—As you already know, I am here to address you on the political topics of the day as an independent reform candidate for a seat in the Lower House of the National Congress.

"Three years ago I held the honorable position of police judge in a flourishing city in Kansas, but when prohibition and the hot winds came sweeping like twin destroyers across that glorious State at one and the same time, it was more than a patriotic, liberty-loving man could stand; so I resigned my judgeship and moved over into Colorado, where freedom flings her banner from every mountain-peak, and personal liberty asserts its mild dominion unhampered by long-haired men and short-haired women in the villages. (Applause, during which time Mike Crogan took a drink from a big bottle).

"But, gentlemen, the invader is flowing over the border into your beloved Centennial State, and unless we rise in our might and assert our manhood and power at the ballot-box, it will not be two years until plain water with all its organic impurities will be the only liquid you'll have to quench your thirst and nerve your spirit and manhood.

"I stand for personal liberty, free speech, free press—the wine-press as well as the printing press (loud applause).

"I am opposed to female suffrage, though I like the women; but, I do not think they are mentally capable of understanding the importance of the ballot and economic questions, like wo men. (Applause.)

"Home, in the sweet sanctity of home, is woman's sphere. If she should get the ballot, agriculture'd be ruined. Grape-growing, barley, and rye, and corn-culture, would die out. The majestic smoke-stacks of breweries and distilleries, now pointing proudly and grandly toward heaven all over our glorious nation, would cease to smoke, and instead of the roar of their furnace fires we'd hear the wheezin' and groanin' of church organs. Disease and pestilence will stalk through the mining-camps of these mountains, because that which sustains life here will be no more.

"There's another evil the gallant warriors of the ballot-box must fight, and that's Wall street and their agents at Washington. Those tyrant money-kings must be dethroned! Of every four dollars' worth of gold you men dig from the bowels of old earth, three of them find their way into the wallets of them kings and their agents, who drink champagne, and eat gorgis suppers, and sometimes die," (Cries of "Good!"); "and then away across the continent, by the longest route, goes a funeral-train, eating and drinking and mourning at our expense, and wasting more good liquors than would keep me and Compromise out of the clutches of miasma for a year. These wrongs must be righted by the voters. You cannot expect relief from the two old parties. They're as corrupt as Sodom and Gomorrah were, (roars of laughter) and it is the reform party to which you must look for relief from robbery and slavery.

"And there's the railroads built at Government expense to accommodate a few rich mines. Men of Compromise, where's your railroad? Is there any reason why the iron horse shouldn't go

snorting up and down this beautiful valley carrying your rich ores to the mills and smelters? Yes, there is a reason why; you don't stand in with Wall street and the Washington Satraps! Mules and cayuses are good enough conveyances for Compromise and the outlying camps. There will be no railroad for you until you assert your manhood at the ballot-box and justice is proclaimed from every mountain peak." (Applause.)

Thus the judge continued for two hours, being frequently interrupted by vociferous applause with which was mingled the "gl-lug-gl-lug-gl-lug" of some miner drinking from a bottle. Finally the judge wound up by saying:

"I have a book here that I want every man who will pledge me his support to sign if he can write, and them that can't, I'll sign for them and they can make their cross. I hope that every freedom-loving man will feel free to sign."

He took from his pocket a small blank-book and fountain-pen and placed them upon the table by which Jack Game was sitting.

The mayor was the first to sign with all the flourish of a John Hancock and legibility of a tarantula's track.

Then followed a general scramble to sign the old reformer's paper. A few signed with "his mark," some with great difficulty, some in a fair business hand, and two or three were too drunk to sign at all.

When all who wished had put down their names Judge Trump thanked them, and with an air of satisfaction placed the book and pen in his pocket.

Then the meeting broke up.

The judge returned with the mayor to his cabin.

"A pretty successful meeting, judge," observed Game, as the two sat down for a chat before retiring.

"I am well pleased," responded Trump.

Thus they conversed for about ten minutes when there came a rap on the door.

"Come in!" called out Game, supposing it was a miner.

The door opened and the tall form of Kit Bandy stepped into the room, and, as he did so, the light streaming out through the open door revealed the presence of two or three horsemen drawn up before the entrance.

"Oh! excuse me, Mr. Bandy!" said Game, apologetically; "I supposed it was one of the miners. But, who are those horsemen out there?"

"They are mounted police," replied the detective, "and I am really sorry, Mr. Game, to tell you that I am here to arrest you. You will have to go with us at once."

Before Game could reply, so thunderstruck was he by this announcement of the old detective, a big, burly, bearded man with a pair of huge revolvers hanging at his hips strode into the cabin and took a position at the detective's side.

Judge Trump arose, and, stepping across the room, closed the heavy door and bolted it as coolly as though he were master of the place.

"Arrest me?" Game found speech to exclaim; "for what?"

"You're wanted by the State authorities. They'll answer your question. You get ready to go with us at once," was the answer the astonished mayor received.

"Mr. Bandy," spoke up Judge Trump, "as a lawyer and a judge, I've had some experience and gained some knowledge of criminal affairs. If you've a warrant for the mayor's arrest produce it, and if you haven't he can resist."

"Here's our warrants," said the big, burly man, tapping his revolvers in a significant manner.

"I'm guilty of no crime," declared the mayor, with emphasis, "and shall resist being arrested. I'll arouse the camp and—"

"Don't do anything of the kind," warned the old detective. "You're fooling with the wrong man, Mayor Game, and, since you are disposed to resist Kit Bandy, I might as well let the cat out of the bag right here and now by confessing that I am *not* Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, but a much better and far more dangerous man!"

"Oh! you're *not* Bandy, eh?" exclaimed Judge Trump, in apparent surprise, shoving both hands into his pants pockets and straightening up his six-foot form.

"No, sir," replied the man, "I am not, but I am Captain Jake Sbarke, the Mountain Outlaw! We are here to take Mayor Game away with us, to tell the honest truth. We do not intend to harm him, providing Compromise comes down with an assessment for his release. We've been

so busy that we could not pay our respects to this camp before, and hope we'll be pardoned for seeming neglect."

"How much boodle do you want?" asked the old judge, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets.

"More than you've got," was the answer; but, scarcely had the self-confessed desperado uttered the last word when he and his companion found themselves gazing into the black mouths of a pair of big derringers in the extended hands of the old judge.

"Don't move a muscle, gents!" the Congressional candidate said, firmly, his eyes blazing with a sudden burst of deadly fire, "for, to let the feline out of the bag, I am Kit Bandy the Mountain Detective!"

CHAPTER X.

THE TRAPPER TRAPPED.

If Mayor Jack Game had been surprised when the reputed Kit Bandy threw off his disguise and proclaimed his true character as Captain Sharke, the outlaw, the robber chief and his confederate were doubly surprised when Judge Trump unmasked, and the *real* Kit Bandy proclaimed his presence. They demanded no further evidence of his being other than Bandy. The sudden change in the old "candidate's" demeanor, the firm-set jaws, the dilated nostrils, the blazing eyes and the big-mouthed derringers were proof enough, at least, to satisfy the villains that they were at the mercy of a dauntless man. The outlaw had been trapped, as it were, by himself—a fact more mortifying to the outlaw than the loss of a dozen mail-coaches.

For several moments the four men stood motionless, silent as stone images. The outlaws did not dare move a hand toward a weapon through fear of those deadly tubes; but, finally, Captain Sharke ventured to turn his eyes toward the barred door with a despairing look.

"Oh, you're my mutton, gents!" Kit Bandy warned: "the next time you play Kit Bandy you'll know how to do it—the kind o' stuff to put up! I don't keer if you have a gang o' friends outside; so you'd as well hand over your shootin'-tools to the mayor!"

"Fool! Do you expect to defy me and thirty desperate men?" Captain Sharke found speech to demand with a sickly attempt at defiance.

"I do, by the ram's horn o' Joshua! That's the kind of an old fool I am! Mayor, relieve the Mountain Sharks of their weepings of war!"

The mayor was astounded by the audacity of the old detective. In the presence of a band of desperadoes impatiently waiting outside, with nothing but the barred door between them, and the whole camp wrapped in slumber, his courage seemed to be the courage of a madman. But, Game, himself, was a brave man, and since the old detective had been forced to disclose his real self to thwart the outlaws in their attempt to take him—Game—a prisoner, he resolved to take his chances with the old man whatever the result, and so advanced to relieve Sharke's burly companion of his weapons.

The outlaw, observing his movements, knew the supreme moment for action had come, and, quick as a flash, grabbed his revolver, but before it was fairly out of his belt, Bandy's pistol rang out with a loud, stunning report, and the villain sunk down without a moan, his revolver falling at Game's feet.

Captain Sharke recoiled a step or two, snarling out an execration, his face assuming a death-like pallor.

Immediately after the shot there came a rap on the door and a voice outside demanded:

"What's wrong in there, captain?"

"Burst down—" Sharke attempted to reply, but only the two words were out of his mouth when Mayor Game rapped him on the head with the dead man's big revolver and brought him down, half-stunned, to the floor.

In a twinkling, Old Kit had produced a pair of steel handcuffs from a rear pocket of his Prince Albert, and with deft celerity clapped them upon the outlaw's wrists; then turning, he blew out the light and the room was in darkness.

The outlaws outside, mistrusting something was going wrong inside, demanded that the door be opened.

No response was made by Kit or Game.

A few minutes passed, then a head appeared at the little open window at the side of the cabin, and a voice asked:

"What's this mean in here?"

A groan from the lips of the reviving robber-captain was the only answer given.

"If you don't open the door, we'll smash it down!" after another minute's silence.

"Git away from that winder, you varlet, or

you'll git your head mashed!" Kit Bandy warned.

The head quickly disappeared. Another silence prevailed, which was at length succeeded by a crash against the door that shook the whole cabin.

However, the door withstood the shock, and before the blow could be repeated, Old Kit took one of the outlaw's big revolvers and fired three shots in rapid succession through the panels. By the sounds of excitement that followed, he was satisfied that the shots had taken effect.

Still the camp slept on, and yet the only hope for Kit Bandy and the mayor was in keeping the now incensed foe at bay until the miners should come to their rescue.

Silently they awaited further demonstrations, for the attempt to force the door was not repeated.

They had no fears of the villains firing into the cabin on account of their own leader being there.

Several minutes passed; then a trampling of horses' feet was heard in front of the cabin.

Mayor Game peered out through a crack in the wall, and then exclaimed:

"The camp's gettin' waked up! I see lights on this side and the Bonnet Creek side, too. We'll soon be out of this!"

But scarcely had he spoken than a yelling, mingled with the clattering of hoofs and the firing of revolvers, burst forth upon the night. Up and down the streets, on both sides of the creek, galloped the outlaws like so many demons escaped from perdition.

Again Jack Game peered out. Every light had disappeared. The object of the outlaws' raid had been accomplished. The camp had been terrorized and driven into hiding.

Back to the cabin of the mayor came the outlaws; and now what next?

It took but a few minutes to decide. A thread of light shone through a crack in the rear of the cabin, and the odor of burning pine pervaded the room. The desperadoes had fired the building in the rear.

It was but a question of a few minutes with the men inside. Their only chance for escape would be through the open door. A score and a half of outlaws with drawn revolvers formed in front of the building to receive them.

CHAPTER XI.

MOMENTS OF SUPREME SUSPENSE.

WHILE the majority of the ruffian band stood aligned in front of the burning cabin, half a dozen others rode up and down the streets of the camp, firing into every cabin where a sign of life made any appearance, thus keeping the miners in terror and concealment.

The fire took hold of the dry pine logs with avidity. It ran up the wall, then reached the roof, and soon the long tongues of flame were shooting into the air above the comb of the roof, lighting the faces of the line of men in front of the building.

And such a line of faces! it would seem that all the arch-villains and desperadoes of the West had congregated together in that band. There were a number of red-skins and Mexicans in the crowd, and even the negro race had two representatives there dressed in skins with the fur on, and presenting a striking resemblance to the African gorilla.

Most of the band remained in their saddles, their revolvers cocked and held ready for instant use. Their eyes were all focused upon the door of the cabin, and as the wavering, flickering light danced over their faces they appeared more like grotesque demons than human beings.

A look of fear and uneasiness, as well as anxiety was upon those atrocious visages. The villains were in doubt as to the fate of their leader and his trusted lieutenant. They saw, furthermore, that it would take longer than expected for the fire to eat through the walls of the cabin and drive out the inmates, while the growing flame was lighting up the Plaza in which they were waiting with the light of the mid-day sun, exposing them to danger should any of the miners have the courage to venture out and open fire on them from the shadows. Nor were their fears without foundation, for suddenly an outlaw uttered a cry of pain and tumbled from his saddle, howling and cursing like a smitten fiend.

No crack of a rifle was heard, but when friends assisted him to his feet they saw blood pouring from a horrible gash on the cheek.

"What done it, Carr? what hurt you?" asked one of the men.

Before Carr could answer, something whizzed

through the air, and with a dull "spat" struck one of the black gorillas in the face almost unhorsing him and causing the negro to roar with pain and rage.

Immediately a third missile from an unseen hand came hurtling from the shadows and struck a horse on the forehead with a crack like that of a pistol. The horse staggered, reared, and, becoming unmanageable, threw its rider and dashed away, almost creating a stampede among the other animals.

For several minutes confusion reigned among the outlaws, in the midst of which the crack of a rifle was heard, and a bullet and more missiles did ugly work in their ranks.

"It's the work of that boy devil, Little Thunderbolt! Away, men, and hunt him down!" suddenly exclaimed an outlaw, who had upon another occasion felt the force of Little Jove's silent, unerring blows.

The direction in which the foe was located was quickly determined by the position in which the stricken men stood when they received the blows, and at once half a dozen Indians, the scouts of the robber-band, were off in search. But of course they found no one, and, to still add to the confusion of the moment, bullets began to whistle from various points in the darkness. Wherever the flash of a gun was seen there would go the red scouts, only to return dismayed.

The situation was becoming critical, and the fire was nowhere near through the walls of the cabin.

"Men!" suddenly exclaimed a big, red-faced outlaw, who seemed to be next in command to the two villains inside the cabin, "we've got to bring this thing to a close! Shubrick, bring up that kicking stud o' yours and we'll back it ag'inst the door and bu'st it down, and let the hoss receive the first shots, and then we'll rush in! We can't wait on that fire to drive 'em out, or we'll all be killed and crippled."

"All right, Moloch," said Shubrick, backing his horse, a vicious little stallion, up close to the door.

This done, both he and Moloch seized the reins and with all their strength gave the bits a jerk, throwing the animal violently back upon its haunches against the door. The door yielded to the animal's weight and flew open with a crash, and so suddenly that the horse, unable to recover its feet, fell over backward into the cabin!

This was something the wily Moloch had not counted upon, and as the storming party rushed to the entrance, the floundering, kicking stallion prevented them from entering, and the next instant all were driven away from the door by the blazing revolvers of the defenders.

All was still darkness within the cabin, and the outlaws dared not fire into it through fear of wounding their friends.

The situation had now become as exciting as it was critical, and if there was any difference the excitement inside the cabin was the greatest, for the terrified horse, having regained its feet, was plunging about the room, crashing among the chairs, kettles and pans, and smashing down everything that came in its way—its heels making the situation for the inmates of the cabin more dangerous than the bullets of the outlaws. Notwithstanding the door stood open, the animal was too blinded with mad affright to see it and escape.

Old Kit and Jack Game endeavored to keep together and out of the way of the stallion's wicked hoofs, and at the same time watch the door.

As for the manacled outlaw, they cared but little whether he was trampled under the horse's hoofs or not. It was all they could do now to save their own lives, and in their efforts in this direction they finally became separated in the darkness. A moment or two later Kit heard a groan and the fall of a body following a blow of the horse's heels. Either Game or the outlaw had been kicked. Bandy called his friend's name. There was no response.

Groping his way around the room, he stumbled against a prostrate form. He felt f the face. It was that of his friend, and to all appearance he was dead. He rolled the body close to the wall to save it from being trampled upon.

Sparks of fire were beginning to drop through cracks in the floor overhead. The fire was eating through the roof; smoke and heat were filling the room.

Outside the excitement was at a fever heat—bordering on a panic. The thunderbolts of Little Jove still kept coming from first one direction and then another, and two of the Indians' scouts having already been killed in their

efforts to run him down, the others refused to make further attempts to find him. Nor could a single outlaw be prevailed upon to enter the cabin where pandemonium reigned.

Moloch and Shubrick kept calling the name of Captain Sharke and Garlock, their friends in the building, but they received no answer, and finally made up their minds that both were dead.

Meanwhile the miners were evidently coming to the rescue, for shots were now being heard in every direction, in spite of the fact that two-thirds of the band was riding through the camp in a vain effort to prevent an uprising.

"Shubrick," Moloch finally said, "this raid is an unholy failure! We've got to git out of this!"

They turned and started for their horses. Just then the mad stallion burst from the burning cabin and shot away across the Plaza like the wind. Upon its back, lying down, his arms clutched about its neck, his heels digging the animal in the flanks, was a man!

All saw the horse, and the rider on its back, but before a word had been uttered or a movement made, Captain Sharke came reeling from the cabin with his manacled arms outstretched before him and his face the very picture of demoniac fury and rage.

"Curse your stupidity!" he fairly roared; "run him down! run him down! It is Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, escaped on that horse!"

CHAPTER XII.

BEN HALL IN COMPROMISE CAMP.

HALF a dozen red-skins and outlaws gave chase to the cunning old detective who had, in fact, escaped from the cabin on the back of the frantic stallion. But they soon returned without either man or horse.

Captain Sharke was assisted onto the back of a horse and led an inglorious retreat from Camp Compromise, leaving a number of their dead friends behind.

Scarcely were they out of the light of the burning cabin when a lithe figure came bounding from the shadows into the light closely followed by two others.

The foremost of the three was Little Jove the Young Thunderbolt, and the other two were Old Tom Rattler and Ben Hall.

Before a single miner had appeared on the ground, Jove and Old Tom rushed into the cabin and brought out the bodies of the dead outlaw and Mayor Jack Game. As they did so a groan escaped the lips of the latter.

By this time a few miners were seen approaching. Old Tom hurried them up, and bade them attend to the wounded man.

Water was speedily brought, and the blood washed from the mayor's face, and his head bathed. In a few minutes he had revived, and almost the first words he spoke was to inquire for Kit Bandy.

"What! has Old Kit Bandy been in Compromise?" exclaimed Old Rattler.

"Old Kit Bandy was in that cabin with me," Game explained, "but the horse kicked me senseless, and what become of him and Captain Sharke, the outlaw, who was also in there with me, I don't know."

"Oh, by gracious!" exclaimed Marshal Bob Mason, "then that slick ole cuss, Judge Trump, Congressional candidate, was the outlaw, Jack Sharke?"

"That slick ole cuss, Judge Trump, was Bandy, and that red-mouthed varlet callin' himself Bandy was the outlaw Sharke. That's the why it stood. Bandy, the genuine, succeeded in clapping the darbies on Bandy, the fraud, and killed his confederate."

"Then it must 'a' been Olá Kitsie that escaped on that hoss," said Old Tom, "for there was one fellow came out on foot and went off with the robbers. Rosycurians! wouldn't I like to wobble his paw. Did you say he came here a candidate for Congress?"

"He passed himself off as Judge Jerry Trump, candidate for Congress, and made a rattlin' political speech at the City Hall to-night," explained Marshal Mason.

"Hal! hal! hal!" laughed Old Tom, "what next will that old man-deceiver and villain-hunter be up to? Kit Bandy a candidate for Congress! Oh, but that's a smiler!"

"If it was he that escaped on that hoss, I reckon he'll be back," said the mayor.

"Mebby he will, and mebby he won't," Rattler answered; "he may turn up to-morrow mornin' in Texas or Montana. The old buccaneer is everywhere and nowhere."

"It might be that he was wounded, and,

although he got away, now lies suffering and in need of help," said the mayor.

"That might be," assented Old Tom, "and we'd ought to look around for him if he doesn't show up soon."

The mayor's cabin was reduced to ashes, and he took quarters with a neighboring miner.

Rattler, Little Jove and Ben Hall were well cared for, and a party sent out to search for Bandy.

The night passed, the searching-party returned, but brought no tidings of the old detective.

The camp was early astir, anxious to ascertain the extent of the night's casualties.

The Bonnet Creeks were sorely twitted by the Hat Creeks over the absence of the distinguished guest they had dined and wined the day before, Captain Jake Sharke.

Shortly after breakfast Little Jove took Ben Hall aside and said:

"Ben, I guess I'll pull out now for Red Notch. I hate to leave you, but I must. But I want you to promise me that before you leave the country you'll come back to Red Notch and remain there until I come in. I might be able to tell you something that'd please you all over. Will you come, Ben?"

"I will, Jove, as sure as my life is spared," Ben Hall responded, with some degree of feeling.

With this, Little Jove took his departure from Compromise.

Ben's mind now turned to the Mystery of the Dismal Desert, and, donning his blue-ribbon badge, he started on a stroll through the camp.

He walked over to the "City Hall" and called on Pat Shinn, the one-legged postmaster. Pat had very little to do but talk, and so he and Ben entered into a conversation. While thus engaged, a man well-dressed entered the room. He was a young man of about thirty and rather prepossessing appearance. He had come to Compromise the day before, and had been entertained at the cabin of Marshal Mason, for Compromise had not yet arrived at the dignity of a hotel. His name was John Chilton.

As the stranger approached, Pat Shinn said:

"Mister Chilton, and let me be affer intro doocin' yees to Mister Ben Hall, one av the three laddies what made it so hot fur them blloody spalpeens last noight."

Chilton extended his hand, and he and Ben went through the usual formalities of new acquaintances, but Ben Hall was suddenly surprised—startled, as he came face to face with the man, for upon the lapel of his coat he saw that he too wore a blue badge!

CHAPTER XIII.

HELD UP BY ROAD-AGENTS.

WHEN Ben Hall saw that John Chilton also wore a blue badge he succeeded very cleverly in keeping his inward emotions from outward manifestations, and if Chilton noticed his badge at all he was equally clever in his indifference to the fact.

But, the very moment Ben could do so with propriety, he bade Chilton good-day and left the "Hall," his mind full of queries and conflicting thoughts. But the main question with him was:

Had John Chilton obtained the secret of the Dismal Desert? and was he endeavoring to solve the mystery and secure Kingsley's gold? Had he found the dead horse on the desert and read "Silent Honor's" words written on the saddle-skirt? If so, was it before or after he and Fred Weston had made their discovery? or, could it be possible that John Chilton was "Silent Honor" himself? or, again, was the fact of a blue ribbon being worn in his button-hole simply a coincidence?

Over these questions Ben pondered for half a day, and the more he thought over them the stronger the conviction became that he must meet Chilton again, and give the man an opportunity to broach the subject if he so desired. On further reflections, however, he changed his mind. Thinking that perhaps Chilton had not noticed his badge, and being somewhat a student of human nature, he concluded to remove his badge and manage to meet Chilton under circumstances that would enable him to study the man carefully.

After dinner he strolled back to the City Hall. He had been there but a few minutes when Chilton came in, and the first thing Ben noticed was that he, too, had taken off his ribbon.

The two now greeted each other with the formalities of old acquaintances, and at once entered into a general conversation with each other and Pat Shinn.

Chilton possessed a good address and all the pleasant, genial qualities of a social fellow, but Ben soon discovered, or, at least, imagined he did, something about him he could not define. It might have been the result of mere suspicion, but in the glance of his dark-gray eyes there seemed a restless, inquisitive look, and at times his mind seemed to be upon something else than the subject under discussion.

After conversing for some minutes on general topics, Chilton asked:

"How long have you been in the West, Mr. Hall?"

"This is my first trip to Compromise Camp, though it is my second summer in the Colorado mountains," answered Ben, evading a direct answer.

"Well, Compromise is a lively camp, or at least it held a flush last night," Chilton observed, with a smile. "A political speech and an attack by robbers is a pretty heavy dose for one night; but I don't see that the camp is any the worse for it, although the disappearance of Old Kit Bandy is troubling the miners a great deal."

"Tom Rattler thinks he'll turn up all right."

"I hope so; he's a clever old fellow, but for the life of me I can't see why he put in two hours making a political speech last night, when he is in reality no candidate. But, Mr. Hall, do you think of investing in mining property, or are you just around for your health and pleasure?"

"Just taking in the sights," answered Ben, "and I assure you they have been many and varied since I landed in Red Notch. I presume you are a Coloradoan, Mr. Chilton?"

When Ben turned questioner, Chilton seemed more reserved, and hesitated a moment before replying.

"You might say that I am," he answered. "I've been knocking around over the State a year or two, and mean to settle down before long, but do not think it will be in Compromise."

Thus for an hour the two conversed, when Bob Mason, the marshal, came in. Mason was a man of about thirty years, and had the appearance and address of a well-bred man, although marks of dissipation were beginning to show about his eyes.

The three now carried on a general conversation, and when Ben Hall finally took his departure, it was with the conviction that John Chilton was a deep, shrewd man, with a secret that he kept carefully guarded. Was it the secret of the Dismal Desert?

During the afternoon Ben met most of the miners of the Hat Creek side of the camp, but none of them recognized his badge.

Toward evening, being unable to find Rattler, he strolled off alone up Bonnet Creek Valley. He wanted to think—to determine his future course. The presence of Chilton disturbed him, for he could not think otherwise than that the man was there upon the same mission as himself. But was he acting from honest motives? or was the possession of Kingsley's gold the only object in view?

Ben finally made up his mind that if the noted Kit Bandy returned he would take him into his confidence and enlist his experience as a detective. He almost regretted that he had not made a confidant of Little Jove. The boy's knowledge of the mountains might have enabled him to accomplish his mission without difficulty. But this was out of the question now, and Tom Rattler—true, trusty Old Tom, who had nursed him through his sickness—was the only one left he could dare think of trusting with his secret, and it seemed he must have some one acquainted with the mountains to help him.

Thus with his mind fully absorbed Ben sauntered up the picturesque little valley until the shadow of a high, wooded bluff falling across his path warned him that the sun was going down. He turned to retrace his steps when he found himself confronted by three masked men who had noiselessly emerged from the bushes at the base of the bluff.

"Throw up your hands, stranger," commanded one of the three, pointing a cocked revolver at his head.

Resistance, Ben saw, would be self-destruction, and as he supposed robbery was their only object, and he had little of value about him to lose, compared with his life, he raised his hands, saying with grim humor:

"Gentlemen, you've struck the wrong man this time if you expect a big haul of wealth."

"You're the fellow that's fooled," responded one of the road-agents, "for it's not wealth we are after."

One of the villains advanced and relieved Ben of his revolver, watch and purse.

Scarcely had he completed his work when the rattle of wheels and the tramp of hoofs were heard, and around the bluff from the direction of Red Notch came Star Route Sam's mail-hack right upon them.

Springing in front of the horses two of the road-agents drew their revolvers and commanded a halt.

"Whoa! ten times in two years!" exclaimed Star Route Sam, as he stopped his mules.

In the hack were two passengers, a man and a woman. The former was an elderly man of five-and-sixty with white hair and beard, and the latter a young girl.

"Passengers will step out and be searched!" commanded an outlaw advancing to the side of the vehicle.

A cry of fear burst from the girl's lips. The old man undertook to remonstrate with the robbers, but they were inexorable and he was compelled to climb out. The girl also got out, and Ben Hall was amazed at the symmetry and beauty of her form and face.

She could not have been over eighteen years of age, with a figure developed in all the graces of womanhood, dark-blue eyes and a face, though wearing a look of fright, that was decidedly handsome.

Even the outlaws seemed enraptured by her beauty and, as if touched by her expressions of fear, one of them said:

"Miss, you may get back into the hack."

As she turned to reenter the conveyance Ben Hall, who had been marched up alongside the wagon, was startled with surprise by the sight of a tiny blue ribbon worn upon her left breast! But he had no time for reflections now, for he was ordered to get into the rear seat of the hack.

Having robbed the old man, he was also ordered back to the middle seat with the girl. Then two of the robbers climbed into the vehicle and squeezed themselves down on either side of Ben Hall, while the third got into the seat with the driver and said, holding a revolver in hand:

"Samuel Star Route, you'll now turn your team and drive back up the creek, and don't be sparing of whip."

The old veteran mail-carrier—hero of ten "hold ups"—knew that he would have to obey or have his head blown off, and so he turned his team, and the heavily-loaded hack went creaking off up Bonnet Creek in the gathering shadows of night.

CHAPTER XIV.

"HAIL FELLOWS" MEET.

LITTLE JOVE left Camp Compromise mounted upon the swift-limbed horse he had taken from the outlaw in Black Rock Canyon some weeks before.

His road to Red Notch Camp ran for about ten miles along Bonnet Creek.

This distance he had nearly covered when, from the bushes in the mouth of a side defile, he heard a voice calling.

Drawing rein a tall man emerged from the bushes and beckoned him to approach.

"It must be Kit Bandy!" Jove thought, and turning his horse's head he rode up to where the man was standing, a broad smile on his face.

"Are you Kit Bandy?" the boy asked, as he approached the man, a little in doubt as to whether he was friend or foe.

"You hit the nail on the head first crack, youngster; I am Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy, and now who are you?" was the man's frank response.

"I'm Little Jove Runkells," answered the boy.

"Bully, by the horn o' Joshua! I've heard o' the Little Thunderbolt, and b'lieve he's my long-lost twin brother! Boy, stop—dismount and let's have a chat—some fun with each other."

Little Jove was so taken by the old detective that he was forced, through curiosity, to comply with his request, and dismounting, he led his horse into the thicket and ditched it, and then he and Bandy sat down and entered into conversation.

"Mr. Bandy, they're awful uneasy 'bout you down at Camp Compromise 'cause you didn't come back there after you got out of that cabin on the hoss," Little Jove said.

"Then you're from Compromise?—glad to hear it. Well, how did things turn out, anyhow, after I departed?"

"Oh, we made it hot for the robbers! and they had to strike for the hills. We saluted several of them," Jove answered.

"And did you find Jake Sharke's dead body in the cabin?"

"No; the outlaw got off alive with handcuffs and all."

"Did ye get the mayor's body out before it burnt?"

"Yes; but the mayor wasn't dead by a long shot, and this mornin' he was good as new."

"Glory! by the horn o' Joshua! that's good news, for that man Game is a hull man. I took to him like a duck to water."

"And he to you; he had men all night searchin' for you; he was afraid you'd been throwed and wounded, but Old Tom Rattler told him—"

"Say!—stop right there, boy; tell me honestly: is Ole Tom Rattler, the hunter, in Compromise Camp?"

"He is."

"Bless my soul! I must see the old, old pirate. I love Ole Tom as a father. He's a lamb for frolic and fun, and a lion for fightin' and bravery."

"You just bet he is, Mr. Bandy!" declared Jove. "I've seen him fight and, as an outlaw said, he's the 'centrated wildcatness o' three generations. Last night, before you escaped from that burnin' shack, Tom and me and Ben Hall, who got into Compromise just in time for the fun, more'n made it lively for the plungers. Old Tom with his gun dealt out lightnin', and I flung stone thunderbolts 'mongst the varmints, and it kept them spinnin' 'round like a monkey to see who was pullin' its tail. But as I was goin' to say: Old Tom told Mayor Game you might come back, and you might not, but that you'd turn up somewhere if not in Congress."

"Well, the fact is," Kit said, smiling, "that ride 'bout done me up. The boss war a wild, vicious brute, and in tearin' 'round in the cabin got his bridle off, an' I couldn't do a thing with him, and be run all the way up here with me like greased lightnin'. He went so fast I didn't dare attempt to jump off, and when he finally fell and threw me off, I crawled into these bushes and nighly died with a wild, warrin' cramp inside my jacket, and here I've been ever since, but am 'bout all right ag'in."

"And had nothin' to eat?" asked Jove.

"Not even a grasshopper."

"Well, I'll stuff you a little," said Jove; "Ben Hall gave me enough lunch, when I left camp, to last a bear a week."

Producing his lunch, he and Kit ate a very hearty dinner.

"Are you going back to Compromise or up to Red Notch?" Jove asked, after they had finished their repast.

"I'm goin' to stay here until night now, and wait for my pard, Ichabod Flea, who was to be in Compromise some time to-day from Red Notch. There's a chap in that camp we want, and the darbies intended for him were worn away by Captain Sharke. Better loaf here with me, boy, awhile and I'll tell you some stories that'll make your scalp creep."

Little Jove was so pleased with the jolly, whimsical old man that he consented to remain with him, at least, until his friend should come along, not particularly to hear the stories that were to make his scalp creep, but because he believed the old detective was still a sicker man than he would admit, and did not want to be left alone.

So, seated there in the bushes where they could watch for Ichabod Flea, and yet not be seen, they talked the hours away.

It must have been near the middle of the afternoon when they heard hoofs and wheels coming down the valley, and soon Star-Route Sam's hack rolled into view and passed on by.

"By the great kiodels!" exclaimed Little Jove, "Sam's got a lady passenger, and she's pretty as a pictur!"

"Bet doughnuts to dollars Old Tom Rattler's in love with her just as sure as he ever claps eyes on her," declared Old Kit. "But what the plague can a young girl like that be doin' in this country? If an outlaw or red-skin gets sight of her face, it may make her a deal o' trouble."

"That must be her old dad with her," said Little Jove, "and they must be hurryin' Old Sam around pretty lively, for he just went up to Red Notch this mornin', and is not due to go back until to-morrow."

The two soon forgot all about the hack, and continued in concealment until about sunset, when Ichabod, not appearing, Old Kit concluded to return to Compromise, and almost regretted that he had not hailed the hack and gone in with Star-Route Sam.

Little Jove offered him his horse, but Kit would not accept it, and he then resolved to go back to Compromise with him, still believing the old man suffering from injuries of the pre-

vious night, and by going with him could prevail on him to ride.

They started off on foot, Jove leading his horse. Darkness came on before they were far on their way, and they had gone less than two miles when they were brought to a stand by a sound like the rattle of wheels coming up the valley this time.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy, "I do believe it's the mail-hack comin' back!"

"It hasn't had time to go to Compromise and back, surely," said Little Jove.

"Never! there's somethin' wrong, lad!"

Concealing his horse, Little Jove and Kit waited in the shadows the approach of the vehicle. It soon rolled past them. It was Star-Route Sam's rig!!

"Boy," said Kit, "there is somethin' wrong there! I'm goin' to follow that hack!"

"And here's with you, Kit," whispered Jove, and leaving the horse, the two set off to shadow the wagon.

CHAPTER XV.

A DEMONIAC SCREAM.

DEEPER and deeper did the mysteries, and greater and greater the dangers, of the mountains gather about the luckless Ben Hall.

With two of his dearest friends dead, and himself now a prisoner in the power of the hill ruffians, was calculated to discourage and dishearten him, brave heart that he was.

As the hack rolled away up the brawling Bonnet Creek, his eyes upon the sobbing girl before him—remembering that he had seen a blue ribbon upon her breast—new fuel was added to his burning thoughts. But, as with John Chilton, her wearing a blue badge might simply have been a coincidence; but, nevertheless, she wore it, and it set him to thinking, and the more he pondered over the matter the more perplexed he seemed to become.

Who could the girl be? What was she doing in that dangerous country? Even though the old gentleman at her side was her father, it must have been upon an extraordinary occasion that they had come into that part of the land.

Ben's hands had not been tied, and he finally began to speculate upon his chances of escape.

The curtains at the side of the hack were finally let down, making it dark as pitch inside the vehicle.

In perfect silence, excepting the almost continuous cracking of Sam's whip over the backs of his weary mules, the ride continued for several miles up Bonnet Creek. Finally the villain at the old driver's side said:

"You'll turn into the next defile on the right, Samuel, and whack 'long them lazy brutes!"

They soon came to the entrance of a defile leading away among the roughest and most desolate of all that mountain country.

Sam was forced to urge on his mules, and at last one of them fell in the harness with sheer exhaustion.

"That settles it with this rig for to-night," declared Sam, leaping from the hack.

"Then we'll camp right here till mornin'," said the outlaw. "Everybody but the young lady'll get out."

All but the girl got out of the hack.

They had stopped where there was a heavy growth of timber, and it was pitchy dark around them.

The two outlaws kept hold of Ben Hall's arm, determined he should not escape, while the third guarded the old passenger and watched over the hack.

Finally one of Ben's captors said:

"Let us take a little walk up the valley."

Ben did not remonstrate, but a sudden fear took possession of him, and he nervously met the worst.

About two hundred yards from the wagon they halted, when one of the outlaws said to Ben:

"Young man, we have no desire to do you bodily harm, but we do have a burning desire for some information we think you can impart."

The speaker's voice sounded vaguely familiar to Ben, and after a moment's reflection he was almost convinced it was that of John Chilton! Then the thought flashed through his mind that if the man was Chilton, the nature of his questions would determine that fact.

"I cannot understand what information I could have for a gang of outlaws," he answered.

"Well, we'll see," said the outlaw; "we want to know if you wasn't a visitor at Red Notch a year ago?"

"I was," promptly answered Ben.

"There, that's information to us," observed the outlaw; "and now will you tell us what takes you to Compromise this year?"

"Private business."

"Of what nature?"

"I decline to answer, sir."

"Not too fast now, young man," cautioned the outlaw in a tone implying a threat. "Now, it has been observed, by a spy of ours, that you and one John Chilton have been wearing a blue badge or ribbon in your buttonholes around Red Notch and Compromise: can't you tell us the meaning of those badges?"

"I cannot, sir—perhaps Chilton can," was Ben's response, now firm in the belief that his interlocutor was John Chilton himself, in disguise.

"You evade a direct answer," the outlaw said; "we know you can give us all the facts connected with that blue ribbon business, and—"

The sound of a shot fired in the vicinity of the hack cut short the outlaw's words, but the last word had scarcely fallen from his lips when a scream, half-human, half-tiger, burst upon the trio's ears almost in their very midst, and at the same instant a dark form sprung upon the back of one of outlaws and dragged him to the earth!

Stricken with fear Ben Hall's questioner rushed away, dragging the prisoner by the ear, believing his friend was in the clutches of some terrible wild beast. But now was Ben's opportunity. Between the outlaw and the demon that had made the gloom shiver with its hideous scream, he would take his chances with the latter, and with all the power of a trained, skilled arm he dealt his captor a blow on the side of the head that sent him reeling away into the bushes half-dazed.

And Ben Hall was again a free man.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

THE minute Ben Hall found himself free he determined to make an effort to rescue the girl captive, and with this end in view started on the double-quick toward the hack, hoping to get in ahead of his late captor whose retreating footsteps he could hear off to his left. But Ben had gone but a short distance when he heard a peculiar whistle that he had heard before. He stopped and listened, and heard the whistle repeated. He answered it in like manner for it was a night-call upon which Little Jove had drilled him the night before.

Footsteps were soon heard approaching, and then a voice called softly:

"Ben Hall?"

"Here," was the answer, and the next moment Little Jove glided up to him in the darkness and grasped his hand.

"Thank God! Little Jove, it is you!" Hall whispered.

"You bet!" was the boy's answer.

"Jove, did you hear that horrible scream a few moments ago, out here?"

"You bet. Wasn't it a compound kioddler, though?"

"Boy, did you utter that scream?" asked Ben, the truth beginning to dawn upon his mind.

"You bet; and I done one of them outlaws up, too!"

"You're a terror, boy; but do you know there is a young girl down here a prisoner?"

"Kit Bandy and I mistrusted there was, and fellered the hack from where we met it on Bonnet Creek to where it halted. We were right there when them fellers asked you to take a walk, and I come after you and Kit stayed to look after those at the hack. Let's hurry on: the old terror may need help."

The two moved on, and as they approached the wagon, Jove signaled their presence, and was answered by Old Kit.

They reached the wagon, where all was excitement. Old Kit was there. The outlaw left in charge was there, also, but he was harmless, silent. The old passenger was wringing his hands and moaning his distress. Star-Route Sam was rushing here and there in the darkness like an insane man.

"What's wrong, Kit, anything?" questioned Little Jove, as he and Ben came up.

"The deuce's to pay! The gal's gone!—disappeared as silently and mysteriously as if dissolved into gloom!" was Old Kit's response.

"That is strange, indeed!" Ben Hall said, "but she may have slipped away in the darkness, and can be found."

"Dead or alive she will be found!" declared Bandy. "Jove, I see you done your part with better success."

"One road-agent got away," said Jove, "and unless he runs across the girl, we'll have no trou-

ble with him. Mr. Bandy, this is the young man I was tellin' you 'bout—Mr. Ben Hall."

Kit and Ben clasped hands and exchanged words of happy greeting.

The next matter of consideration was the finding of the girl, and while arrangements for the search were being made, Ben Hall approached the old passenger and said:

"Stranger, pardon me, but will you give me your name?"

"Reuben Dayton," the old gentleman answered.

"And was that young lady your daughter?"

"No, sir, my niece, Edith Kingsley."

"What! Edith, the sister of John Kingsley?" cried Ben.

"Oh! you knew poor John! who are you, sir?" Dayton asked.

"Ben Hall, John's friend," answered Ben.

"Then you are the very person we were going to Compromise to see. Edith received a long letter from you explaining the death of her brother, and finding of his body by one 'Silent Honor.' She answered your letter but got no reply, and after waiting over time for a second letter and it came not, all earth couldn't hold her back, and to Red Notch she came, and, of course, I came with her."

"I never received so much as the scratch of a pen from her, Mr. Dayton," Ben declared.

"That's strange, indeed, Mr. Hall," Dayton answered: "but I am afraid the poor child will not be found alive, or if alive, worse than dead!"

"How did she escape without your knowledge?" questioned Ben.

"A few minutes before Mr. Bandy's attack, the outlaw gave her permission to get out of the hack, which she did, climbing out on the opposite side. The air being chilly, I assisted her to put on her long cloth cloak, and then she removed her hat and pulled the cloak-hood well over her head. That was the last I saw of her. Star Route Sam says she was standing within five feet of him when Mr. Bandy fired that shot."

In the mean time, Little Jove and Kit had recovered from the bodies of the dead outlaws nearly all the valuables taken from Ben and Dayton, while Ben was well armed with the slain robbers' weapons.

The search for Edith began. It lasted until midnight, and from midnight until morning, but not a trace of the girl could be found. She had vanished as if dissolved into the gloom of night, sure enough.

Gloomy as were the spirits of the little party day dawned. A mist hung over the hills, obscuring the sun, to Ben Hall a dreadful reminder of the days he and Fred Weston had passed upon the Little Dismal Desert.

The search for the girl was to be renewed and prosecuted until she was found, dead or alive. Before the searchers set out, however, they had the satisfaction of seeing the mail-hack on its way to Compromise, carrying with it the almost prostrated Reuben Dayton.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE ROBBERS' RELAY.

WHAT, indeed, had become of Edith Kingsley? Let us see: as Star-Route Sam had said, she stood within a few feet of him when Kit Bandy attacked the robber in charge of the hack, and if he had given his attention to the girl then instead of permitting it to be drawn aside to the scene of the brief struggle, he might have seen a shadowy form whisk the girl away into the shadows with the silence of a phantom.

While the report of Old Kit's revolver was ringing in her ears, Edith felt a hand touch her arm, and heard a voice whisper:

"My lady, come quick! Now's your chance! I'm a friend!"

Speechless and helpless, Edith permitted herself to be led rapidly away as if completely under a mesmeric influence.

It is true she had a vague knowledge of a shot being fired near the hack, and of the sounds of a struggle, but she was so bewildered, so confused, and her brain so nearly paralyzed with terror, that she could comprehend nothing of the real truth.

Like a child she was led hurriedly away by the unknown, both silent and speechless, her mind and body as completely at the will power of her conductor as his own right hand.

After proceeding nearly a mile in this way, her rescuer or captor, she knew not which, ventured to ask:

"Can you ride horseback, miss?"

Faintly, deliriously she answered in the affirmative.

Groping about in the dark, they finally came to where a horse was hitched to a tree.

Edith was assisted into the saddle, and then taking the reins, her conductor led the horse away up the defile.

Who the man was, and where he was taking her, it did not occur to the mind of the poor, helpless, terrified girl to inquire; but every mile or so the horse was stopped and the man inquired in kindly tones after her comfort.

Always receiving a satisfactory answer, the retreat was continued until the defile became so rough and choked up with rocks and bushes, that it was impossible to proceed further with the horse until daylight.

So assisting the girl from the saddle, he turned the horse loose to graze, and conducted the maiden to a place of security under a ledge of rock on the right of the defile. Nor was this stop made a moment too soon, for the sound of voices was heard going in the direction whence they had come.

"Harkee, girl!" said Edith's companion; "we're here none too soon, for there goes a gang o' night-prowl' robbers! If we'd gone on, we'd 'a' run plump into their hands. We'll be apt to lose our boss, anyhow, but it's a good thing I didn't hitch it, or they'd mistrust the owner was near. They may, anyhow, and come nosin' round and some o' them git killed."

"Might they not be friends?" Edith asked, beginning at last to realize the position she was in.

Her rescuer chuckled softly as he replied:

"You're not acquainted with the people and ways of the mountains, I know, miss."

"No, sir," Edith admitted, "I am not. I am even ignorant of the name of the man who rescued me from the road-agents."

"That's me you mean, miss. Well, I am Old Tom Rattler, a sort o' a mountain tramp. I'm not handsome, and have left many busy years behind me, but I can fight like a nailer yet, and when it comes to pretty gals, I feel like a boy o' forty."

"I heard of you at Red Notch Camp," Edith said; "we were told that a Mr. Ben Hall had left there with Tom Rattler and a boy called Little Jove."

"That was true; but pardon me. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Edith Kingsley," she answered, "and with my uncle was on the way to Compromise Camp to see Ben Hall when the outlaws captured us. Is he still at Compromise?"

"Ah! you do not know Ben, I see?"

"No, sir; I never met him. He was a friend of my brother."

"But you have seen him, Miss Edith; Ben Hall was a prisoner in that same hack with you."

"That young man Ben Hall?" cried Edith.

"Yes, that was Ben; I war out skirmishin' in the woods 'long t'other side o' Bonnet Creek for a deer when you were all held up. I war too far away to render assistance, and dare not shoot for fear o' hurting innocent folks for you war all bunched together. But the moment you war all bundled into the hack and started north, I cut back to Compromise, give the alarm, mounted Old Peeler and sailed out to foller ye. I came in hearin' o' the hack just as you left the Bonnet Creek Valley. I rid on close as I dare, finally left my hoss and follered on foot."

"Then you were entirely alone?" Edith remarked.

"Yes."

"Then what was the meaning of that shot fired just at the moment you came to me by the hack?"

"I don't know, Miss Edith. Others might'a' been shadowin' the hack, and then mebby the varlets had fell out 'mongst themselves and went to shootin'. At any rate, the shot war fired just in time to help me out, for I war resolved to save you fu'st and the others after'ds, and here we are, all right so far."

"You are a kind, brave old man, and I am most grateful for your help; but I am afraid poor Uncle Reuben and Ben Hall will be murdered. If they are, my mission into this dreadful hill-country will be worse than hopeless!"

"If thar's anything befalls them, gal, remember Old Tom Rattler will be your friend and protector just as long as you are in the mountains!"

"Oh, thank you! thank you, Tom Rattler!" the girl exclaimed in grateful tones; "I will have to depend upon your kindness and protection until I reach a place of safety, though I may never be able to repay you."

"The pleasure o' doin' somethin' for the happiness and comfort of others pays me with compound interest. I've neither chick nor child o'

my own dependin' on me in this world, and so I owe it to my Maker to do somethin' for humanity even though it be in my humble walks. And now I am havin' plenty to do in these parts. The hills hereabouts are swarmin' with lawless hordes o' red-skins and whites. Every camp is full o' sin and Satin. I tell ye it's no place for a gal like you. The days o' chivalry are past, with Rocky Mountain outlaws, at least. A woman's no safer than a man here. But now, miss, if you'll compose yerself, and rest yer mind and body, and perchance get a wink or two o' sleep, you'll feel refreshed and 'vigorized for a long, hard tramp when daylight comes."

"I do not think I shall sleep much, Mr. Rattler, but I will try and be ready for the morning's journey."

Clad in her heavy waterproof, Edith experienced no inconvenience from the chill mountain air, and reclining upon a couch of fine boughs Old Tom arranged for her, she rested quite comfortably and even slept a little.

The night wore away and at early dawn Tom made a search for his horse, but it was gone, and so the journey was resumed afoot.

When daylight revealed to Edith the homely yet kindly face of her old rescuer, her hopes were strengthened and confidence renewed as if by an inspiration.

They continued on up the defile, then turned to the right and ascended a long, gentle slope to the summit of a ridge over which they passed and then began the descent of another rocky incline that led down into a deep canyon.

They had almost reached the bottom when they suddenly landed upon a broad bench or ledge to find themselves in front of a wide opening or grotto in the hillside, which was hidden from below by a fringe of bushes that grew along the edge of the bench.

The moment old Tom glanced into the grotto an exclamation burst from his lips. He saw it was a human habitation, though no one was visible about the place. There were pallets of furs and blankets on the floor along the wall. Boxes, articles of men's clothing, a saddle or two, and a number of rifles were scattered about the room.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" Tom exclaimed, "it's a robbers' roost as sure as my name's Rattler!"

But he had no sooner spoken than he regretted having done so, for he saw Edith's face grow white with fear. To make amends, however, he continued:

"But the varlets are not likely to bother us. It's only a relay station where they drap in occasionally, and I'm goin' to see if I can't find somethin' fit to eat."

And he did. In a box he found some crackers, in another some smoked beef and some other edibles. He made free with whatever suited him, and both he and Edith dined "sumptuously" off the brigands' supplies.

They had finished their repast and Old Tom was filling his pockets for future need when a shadow suddenly fell across the entrance to the grotto, and a man confronted them!

Old Tom quickly grasped his revolver, but the intruder stepping back a pace so that the light fell upon his face, the hunter recognized him and exclaimed:

"By the Rosycrusians! it's Mr. John Chilton, o' Camp Compromise!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TIGER'S CLAWS APPEAR.

"FOUND at last!" burst from the lips of John Chilton, the moment Old Tom recognized him, bowing politely to Edith.

But at sound of his voice the girl started back and Old Tom saw a look of fear mantle her fair face.

"Who do you mean, Mr. Chilton? the gal, or me, or this robbers' roost?" asked Old Rattler.

"The young lady of whose capture by road-agents you brought word to Compromise," responded Chilton.

"That's the very gal, Mr. Chilton. Are you here alone?" the hunter asked.

"Oh, no," Chilton answered; "after you brought news of the capture several of the miners and I struck out. But you were too fast, for us, Rattler."

"Where are your friends?" Tom continued to question.

"Across the valley stopping for dinner."

"Did you know of this roost bein' here, Mr. Chilton?"

"Certainly not, sir," answered Chilton, betraying some restlessness. "I thought I saw some one moving behind those bushes and came up to investigate. Will you return with me to my party, miss?"

As if showing an utter contempt for the old hunter he turned his back almost upon him as he asked the question.

Edith noticed the implied insult. Her face flushed with indignation, and her dark-blue eyes flashed upon him a look of derision as she replied:

"I am in Tom Rattler's care, and where he goes I will go!"

"Tom will go with us, will you not, Rattler?"

"Not just at present," replied the hunter.

"Why not?"

"I object to bein' questioned, Mr. Chilton."

"Old scoundrell you mean that girl harm!" exclaimed Chilton, turning with a look of fierce rage upon the old man.

"Git, now, John Chilton! and be spry 'bout it!" retorted Rattler, thrusting his revolver into the man's very face.

With a muttered oath Chilton turned and left the grotto.

"Thank the Lord!" exclaimed Edith, as he disappeared, "that man is one of the three road-agents that held us up last night. His face was masked, it is true, but I recognized his voice."

"And this is one of the villains' rendezvous," said Old Tom; "he knew it was here, and came in for somethin' and was surprised to find us here. I saw that at a glance, though he tried to bluff us. It's a good thing he came alone. But I must watch the scoundrel, and see where he goes."

The old man crept to the mouth of the grotto and out upon the ledge, and gazed around him.

It was not over fifty feet down to the bottom of the canyon from where he stood. From bluff to bluff, as much as two hundred yards, was a level stretch or bed of white sand without a stone or shrub upon it. Across this open level Tom saw John Chilton going directly toward the opposite bluff, near the base of which was a clump of willows, which betokened the presence of a spring.

Into that clump he saw the man disappear, and in about five minutes later emerge therefrom again followed by no less than ten persons, half of whom were Indians in white men's attire.

Straight across toward the grotto they started, but their steps were suddenly arrested.

From the point where they had started the sand-bed spread out to the opposite bluff like a fan, being triangular in shape. At the lower angle or edge grew a few scattering sage-bushes, and from behind one of these bushes, not over forty paces from the band led by John Chilton, a lithe figure suddenly sprung erect and made a motion as if throwing something, then turned and sped away along the edge of the barren obliquely toward the other bluff.

"Little Jove! by the great Rosycrusians!" burst from Old Tom's lips, as he threw his gun in front of him for instant use.

The Indians and their white allies uttered a fierce yell, sent several shots after the boy, and then started in pursuit.

Old Tom raised his rifle, but did not fire, for, from behind a barricade of rocks where Little Jove disappeared, there came the report of half a dozen rifles and two of the allied gang of outlaws were seen to fall, and the chase came to an end.

Taken thus by surprise, the band beat a hasty retreat to the cover of the bushes whence they had come, dragging their fallen comrades with them, with John Chilton well in the lead.

"Oh, Tom Rattler!" cried Edith, in alarm; "what does that all mean?"

"Peace to you, Miss Edith," responded the old man; "friends as well as enemies are near, and the latter have just been whipped back to their hiding-place!"

Rattler's elevation enabled him to see the positions of both friends and foes, and yet not be seen. The barricade of rocks behind which Little Jove disappeared was at one corner of the triangular opening and about the same distance from the grotto as the enemy's covert. He could make out about six persons lying and kneeling behind the rocks, and one of the six he was almost certain was Kit Bandy.

After watching them for some minutes, Tom became satisfied that his and Edith's presence was unknown to the party, and thought it possible that they were laboring under the impression that the girl was a captive in the clump of willows.

To attempt to reach their friends would be to expose themselves to the enemy's rifles, and through fear they might depart, Tom resolved to make their presence known.

He told Edith to step out upon the ledge where she could be seen by their friends, and

met the foe. This she did, and then Old Tom fired off his revolver twice. They saw the men behind the rocks look their way. Edith waved her handkerchief to them, and immediately a ringing shout came up from the valley.

In the excitement consequent upon the discovery one or two of the men exposed themselves above the rocks, and the outlaws sent half a dozen bullets whistling over their heads, that caused every man to "duck" down in a twinkling.

The situation was rather a peculiar one. Two parties were lying in wait to kill each other, neither daring to venture from its position without exposure to deadly Winchesters, while the same danger kept the two parties of friends apart.

A serious loo' settled over Tom's face that Edith did not fail to notice. The old veteran knew that the situation was not only a peculiar one, but a critical one that must finally terminate in bloodshed and death!

CHAPTER XIX.

TOM RATTLER'S RUSE.

THERE were seven persons concealed behind the barricade of rocks below the grotto. Little Jove, Kit Bandy, Ichabod Flea, Ben Hall, Mayor Jack Game, and two miners of Compromise Camp were there.

They were in search of Edith Kingsley. The miners having heard from Rattler of the capture of Ben Hall and Star-Route Sam's passengers, had hastened in pursuit. On the road they met Ichabod Flea on his way to join Bandy at Camp Compromise, and the little detective turned back with them, and the four had the good fortune to meet Bandy and his two friends early in the morning.

Little Jove having struck the trail of a party of men supposed to be outlaws, they had followed it up expecting to find Miss Kingsley in their power.

At the sand-lot in the canyon they discovered the robber-gang had halted, and Little Jove was sent to reconnoiter their position in the willows with the result already narrated.

Of course, Jove did not gain the information sought, but the appearance of the girl on the ledge settled the question as to her whereabouts.

"I'll bet a land-title in the polar regions," exclaimed Old Kit after the girl had been discovered, "that Old Tom Rattler is up there with that gal, and if he is I'll draw a bead on him at sight, the old thief!"

"If so," said Ben Hall, "how much trouble, and suffering no doubt, might have been escaped had you and Jove known that he was about when you attacked those outlaws."

"Yes, all would now be safe in Compromise," Old Kit observed, "but then we all acted as we saw best, under the circumstances. I reckon there'll be some more bloodshed before we get to the gal or she gets to us. Them varlets know wheres he is, and war trapsein' over there when Little Jove created a sensation among them. If Old Tom Rat is up there I'll bet his ole' eyes are glued on that willer-patch, and his finger on the trigger of his gun, and his big heart pumpin' away like an engine."

"It's a three-cornered affair, isn't it, Kit?" Little Jove remarked, "and one party's afraid to venture out, and the other dassest. Holy mist! how I'd like to ker-sock a few stones into that kiyote nest over there!"

"If it wasn't for wastin' lead I'd throw a feeler or two into that brush for the fun o' it," Kit declared. "It is a rather humiliatin' position for a candidate for Congress and the Mayor of Compromise wallerin' in the dirt here behind these rocks. I'd ruther fight if that dumbed outfit'd come out on the sand. But they're goin' to be cautious, and if we don't get that gal down from there before dark, we'll have a time o' it."

"Maybe she can't get down from there," said Jack Game.

"And it may be she is *not* the girl we are after," said Ben Hall. "That girl is dressed entirely different from what Miss Kingsley was when I last saw her."

"Well, it's some woman, anyhow," replied Kit, "and that's enough for me, unless she's a siren tryin' to decoy us into a trap—see! there she stands again, cloaked, hooded and I believe veiled. By the horn o' Joshua! boys, she's descendin' the hill! she means to bring this matter to a close! Now look out for the savages if she comes this way—by heavens! there they come now! Up, men, and forward to meet them!"

The supreme moment had indeed come. The girl ran down the hill and turned and started

toward Bandy and his friends. The allied outlaws burst from their covert with a yell and ran like racers across the opening in an endeavor to cut her off, while Bandy and his party sped with equal swiftness to meet her.

Two red-skins took the lead of their party and like greyhounds flew across the barren. They were almost upon the fugitive when to the utter amazement of all she stopped, turned suddenly dead, raising a revolver, shot the two savages dead, one of them plunging forward and falling at her feet.

"Brave gal!" shouted Old Kit.

By this time the two parties were coming face to face, the fugitive between them. Rifles and revolvers began to ring out, and the fugitive fell forward at full length upon her face in the sand.

As past her prostrate form swept the rescuers and met the foe in the shock of battle.

With the very first blow, however, the foe receded, broke and ran. But that one blow was a terrible death-dealer, and one half the outlaws went down at the crack of the rescuers' revolvers.

All but Kit Bandy started off in pursuit of the panic-stricken survivors who now fled up the canyon.

The old detective stopped, and lifting the still prostrate form of the woman from the ground in his strong arms, started with her toward the bluffs, not certain whether she had been shot by the foe or had only fainted.

"There comes another woman!" suddenly burst from Jack Game's lips, and glancing to the right Bandy saw, true enough, a second woman with bared head and white face, come running toward him from the same direction the limp form in his arms had come.

And almost simultaneous with this discovery life seemed revived in the burden in Old Kit's arms, for it wriggled like an eel from his clasp, stood erect, threw aside hood and vail, and revealed the smiling, triumphant face of Old Tom Rattler!

CHAPTER XX.

CAUSED BY THE DISMAL DESERT MYSTERY.

With a look of the most infinite disgust and unutterable scorn depicted upon his face, Kit Bandy recoiled from the smiling Tom Rattler, and grasping his revolver, exclaimed:

"If you have anything to say, Old Tom, say it quick! Your days o' deception are numbered!"

"Howdy, Kitsie Band, valorous knight o' the mountains?" was Old Tom's reply, advancing with outstretched hands toward the old detective.

Kit grasped the hand, and his clouded face burst into sunshine as he exclaimed:

"I'll forgive you once more, Tom Rattler. God bless your cunnin' little carcass! but I say it was very mean to rob the girl o' her clothes and then desart her. But she's safe, too, thank Heaven!"

Almost breathless Edith approached, escorted by Little Jove. Old Tom quickly and gallantly assisted her to don her water-proof that had served him so well, saying, as he did so:

"The ruse worked like a charm, Miss Kingsley, and you are safe with valiant friends. Here's Old Kit Bandy; you can depend upon his fightin' qualities and courage but not on what he tells you; and this is Little Jove, the Mountain Thunderbolt; and here's Ben Hall, the friend o' your dead brother."

The eyes of the two young people met, and as Edith extended her trembling hand to Ben, she said:

"I am so glad!"

"It was under as trying circumstances as these we met before, Miss Kingsley, though unknown to each other. I thank God we are safe at last!" was the earnest response of Ben Hall.

"But, oh! what has been the awful cost, Mr. Hall?" exclaimed Edith, glancing at the dead bodies near, while her ears were being assailed by the groans and cries of the wounded that lay writhing in the hot sand.

"Come, Miss Hall," urged Ben, "you must not remain here."

He escorted her to a seat on a rock at the foot of the bluff.

Old Kit and Tom turned their attention to the battlefield, and found their victory had not been bloodless. One of Jack Game's miner-friends had been slain, while Jack himself and Ichabod Flea were wounded. But their injuries were slight, and they remained on active duty.

Half the enemy had been killed and wounded

at the first discharge of the rescuers' revolver. Two of their wounded were left on the field, and one of these Old Tom recognized as John Chilton, whose face was growing pallid with death.

"By the great Rosy-crusians!" the old hunter exclaimed, "you're here, young man. The wages o' sin is death. You'd ought to 'a' been in better business, John Chilton. Your course as a road-agent and a liar were short, and you'd better be makin' your peace with your Maker."

"Is Ben Hall with you?" the dying man feebly asked.

"Yes."

"Tell him I would like to speak with him." Ben Hall was summoned to the side of the dying man.

"Do you see this, Hall?" he asked, pointing to a blue bit of ribbon on his breast stained with blood.

"Yes," answered Ben; "I saw it yesterday morning when you came into the post-office at Compromise."

"And you wore one, too?"

"Well?" was young Hall's only answer, hopeful that the Mystery of the Dismal Desert was at last about to be revealed.

"You know, of course, why I wear it?" Chilton observed.

"I have nothing to say," answered Hall.

A grim smile passed over Chilton's pallid face.

"You are observing 'Silent Honor's' instructions to the letter," he said. "A friend and I riding across that barren found a dead horse. On it was a saddle, and on the skirts of that saddle were written—Well, you know what?"

"Exactly," Ben answered, with a nodding of the head.

"I have been endeavoring to find 'Silent Honor,'" Chilton went on, "and get possession of the unknown dead man's gold by hook or crook. I noticed that girl, Edith Kingsley, also, wore a badge of blue. That accursed secret has about cost me my life. I don't think I'll get onto my feet again. Now, I tell you this in justice to my friend who was with me when we found that dead horse on the desert. You may meet him wearing the blue ribbon—in search of 'Silent Honor,' but, as a dying man I want to say to you that he is an honorable man, and because you find me here, he is not to be associated with robbers and road-agents. His motives, too, are honorable, for he suspects the dead man is a friend of his and is anxious to ascertain the facts if possible. His friend left camp during his absence and has not been heard of since, and he knew he had considerable gold before he disappeared."

Ben was strongly tempted to ask the name of that missing friend, but in the presence of those around him the admonition of "Silent Honor" to "be careful"—"ask no questions until questioned" sealed his lips.

By request of the wounded man he was carried to the grotto to die, as was also another wounded outlaw, and there the two were left.

The party that carried them up brought back a blanket each and a supply of such food as they found in the "roost."

A shallow grave was scooped out in the sand and the body of the dead miner interred, and then the party set off down the canyon in the gathering shadows of night. Nor was their departure from the barren made a moment too soon, for they were scarcely under cover of the woods beyond the opening when a score and a half of howling red-skins and outlaws under Captain Jake Sharke, himself, burst like a whirlwind into the barren from the woods above!

CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE RETREAT.

THE little party of rescuers was not ignorant of the appearance of the outlaws upon the barren, hurried there no doubt by those who had escaped from the fight.

With Little Jove in the lead as guide, Tom Rattler and Ichabod Flea took the responsible and now dangerous position of rear guard.

Ben Hall acted as Edith Kingsley's escort, and in this order retreat was made on the double-quick for awhile, and then they settled down to a steady gait.

That they would be followed they had no doubt, and, in hopes of throwing the robbers off their trail, Little Jove decided to lead his friends over into Black Rock Canyon, and thence to Red Notch Camp instead of to Camp Compromise.

Of course, it was with the general approval of all that this diversion was decided upon.

The boy proved himself a careful and skillful guide, and by midnight they were several miles

from the scene of Edith and Tom's rescue from the grotto.

But Edith was showing signs of fatigue, though she made no complaint, and, as the scouts, Rattler and Flea, reported no enemy in sight or hearing, a halt was made for the rest of the night.

Under an overhanging bluff a good shelter was found.

Tom Rattler and Little Jove were relieved of further duty, for they had slept none the previous night. Ichabod Flea and Ben Hall were to take the first watch, and at once went on duty. They were to be relieved by Kit Bandy and Jack Game about three o'clock in the night.

A couch of the blankets brought from the robbers' "roost" was assigned Edith, and thus all was arranged for the night.

When Old Kit finally sat down, he said, with a deep-drawn breath of relief:

"This is bodily comfort, at last, and if it wasn't for the sadness I feel on account of Old Tom Rattler, I'd be perfectly and serenely happy."

"Don't let a thought 'bout me disturb your massive mind, Kitsie," responded Old Tom; "I'll stay 'round till ye'r safe."

"If you do, I hope you'll not rob Miss Edith o' her clothes to git away in when danger assails us," retorted Bandy. "Oh, Tom! that war a little the meanest trick o' your tempestuous ole life, and I'm ashamed o' you. But then you're gittin' old and doted, and, and—"

"Mr. Bandy," broke in Edith, "I assure you his motives in disguising himself in my water-proof and vail were most honorable. He did it to draw the enemy out before dark and end the terrible suspense. Tom Rattler is a brave, kind and unselfish man."

"On your account, miss, I'll forgive the ole tempest just one time more," Kit said; "but when I think o' how I went trottin' across that sand with the old sinner, snickerin' of course, in my arms, it makes me feel cheap. He's played that infernal trick on me before: once I toted him two miles, believin' him a helpless woman, only to find out, when I got to a light ready to drop with exhaustion, it was Old Tom. By the horn o' Joshua! the next time will be the last!"

"Kitsie," said Old Tom in his droll way, "these people might believe what you're sayin' if you didn't have a red record as a fraud and a truth-twister."

"When as Jedge Jerry Sampson Trump, you swooped down upon the innocent miners o' Compromise in darby hat and long-tailed coat, a candidate for Congress, and stood up and lied to them by the hour and the miles like a big-nosed Jew, whar then war yer tender, dove-like conscience?

"Oh, by the great Rosycrusians! the ijee, of Old Kit Bandy in Congress tellin' his ole worm-eatin' stories 'bout Sabina, his wife, and his martyrdom at the President's blow-out! Wouldn't the eagle scream? Wouldn't there be a wild, mad rush to hear the ole lilly-lipped hummer from the Rockies warble his eloquent tongue, and warp his majestic form about as he thundered, and roared, and lied for a 'propriation for to build Compromise a railroad and improve the navigation o' Bonnet Creek? Jerusalem! Bandy the *deetective*, the rescuer, the gallant, in Congress! I'll bet cents to dollars he'd undertake to rescue the Goddess o' Liberty from her perilous position on the big dome, and whisper words o' sweetness in her wooden ear! Ole Kit's a mighty fool 'bout the ladies!"

"Say, Thomas," said Bandy, when the laugh on him had subsided, "hadn't you better go to bed and take yer mouth with you? It's gittin' noisy and mixed up and don't track well."

"Good-night, Kitsie," was Tom's reply, and stretching himself on the bare earth, his head on his arm, the brave, jolly old veteran soon fell asleep.

Little Jove and Joe Ford, the wounded miner, fell asleep near him, while Edith slumbered on her couch of blankets. Only Old Kit and Jack Game remained awake, and after discussing the perils of their situation awhile, Bandy finally said:

"Jack, you asked me last night the object of my coming to Compromise in disguise and in making that speech, and now, seeing our trip may soon come to an end, barring no further trouble and since I've found you to be made of pure metal, I'm going to tell you what I came to Compromise for, for I may need your help."

"It's not often I talk when I'm on a trail, unless it's to kill time, and sometimes have to do haydoogins of beating around the bushes to get the bird in the branches."

"But my story is this: Years ago, as Peter

Pindar says, a great forgery was committed on a Montreal bank, in Canada. The crime was traced to one Doctor Arthur Redmon, and it looked as though the doctor would dispense pills in the 'Pen,' if at all. He protested his innocence, but the evidence was plain and strong, as it seemed then.

"The doctor was a man in middle life, with a wife and one child—a girl. He and his wife occupied a high social position. He was a fine physician and a devout Christian.

"Well, before his trial came on, the very men against whom the forgery was committed—men that'd been his friends—agreed to compromise the matter with him if he'd slip away—after turning over his property to his bonds-men—go to some foreign country, change his name and begin life anew.

"At first he rejected the proposition with indignation and scorn, still declaring his entire innocence, and that running away would be an admission of guilt.

"At length, however, he yielded to their persuasions, though under protest, and disappeared with wife, baby, bag and baggage. His bonds-men then took possession of his property and forked over the forfeited bail.

"His disappearance was the sensation of the day, then the matter began to quiet down and finally became almost forgotten. But 'bout a year or so ago it was revived after some fifteen years of rest. One Conrad Wells, a ten-year prisoner, dying, made a confession to the warden and to one o' the bank officials that he was the real culprit in the Redmon bank-forgery affair, and that Doctor Redmon was as innocent of the crime as a babe unborn.

"The forgery, he admitted, had been effected by the help of one Henrique Dubien, a young French-Canadian writing-master who was a wizard with the pen.

"Dubien was remembered as a sharp, shrewd young fellow, who disappeared from Montreal shortly after the forgery was committed. Wells said he came to the States and had last heard of him, three years before, at Leadville, under an assumed name, of course.

"But now comes Doctor Redmon's friends offering a big reward for the apprehension of Dubien. They mean to clear the name of Doctor Redmon of the stain upon it, whether he is ever found or not.

"The detectives raked together a few old specimens of Dubien's handwrite, and with these struck out to find the tricky forger. He was a fine penman and an original penman. His style was Dubien's and Dubien's only.

"The case was placed in my hands six months ago, and I began working the camps and towns. Now, mayor, if there's any one thing I pride myself on it's diggin' facts out of men's handwriting, and I don't believe there's a man that hops that can disguise his handwrite so's I can't tell it. He might lose his right arm and learn to write with his left hand, and do it miserably, but the idea of forms left in the mind will be transferred to the hand, and there will be a similarity. Ten, twenty or fifty years will not change the personal characteristics of a man's handwrite. It's true, a skillful penman can *forge* another's name, as Dubien did, and leave no trace of self, but when that is done he goes back to self, and whether he follows teaching, digging gold, shoveling dirt, or whacking bulls, the old style will show up whenever he touches a pen.

"I studied Dubien's handwrite, and then resolved to find him if he was in Colorado. As I said before, he was sailing under a false name. When he left Canada he was a beardless man of twenty. Years had, no doubt, changed him into a bearded man whom nobody, who had known him in Montreal, would be able to recognize. His handwrite was the only means of identity.

"Well, the first camp I worked was for subscriptions for a book on "Poker Playing and Mixing Fancy Drinks." Everybody in the place subscribed, and a few took two copies. But Dubien wasn't a subscriber.

"I next circulated a petition in another place for increased mail facilities in that and other camps. Still no Dubien.

"In the next camp another petition was circulated asking a big liquor dealer in Denver to start a branch store in the place. Everybody there signed that paper in a holy jiffy. And still no Dubien-fist appeared.

"Then as my next expedient I struck out for Congress. My first speech was delivered in your camp, and there I secured the pledge of the miners in writing. As you remember, all signed my paper, and, by the horn o' Joshua! my man Dubien's name was among the signers!"

"The nation, you say!" exclaimed Mayor Game.

"That's a fact, Mr. Game, unless I'm sadly fooled the fu'st time in twenty years."

"Why didn't you make the arrest?" asked Game.

"I thought I'd wait until morning to see what that fellow passing himself for Kit Bandy was up to, and I found out. The rest you know."

"Well, I declare!" said Jack Game, "I can't think who in all Compromise your forger could be."

"Mayor, I don't always talk out loud when I'm on a hunt, for fear of flushing my bird, but since I find you're made of clear bell-metal, I don't mind telling you that the first letters of his name are—Bob Mason."

"What! the Marshal o' Compromise Camp?" exclaimed Mayor Game.

"The Marshal of Compromise Camp!" repeated Old Kit.

CHAPTER XXII.

AGAIN IN DANGER.

THE night passed without the occurrence of a single incident to mar the rest of the little party and by daybreak they were on the move, Little Jove in the lead and Old Tom Rattler, refreshed by a few hours' sleep, acting as rear guard. All felt that the outlaws had been successfully eluded, but in this belief they were doomed to bitter disappointment. They were nearing Black Rock Canyon when the crack of a rifle in the rear suddenly broke upon the morning quiet.

"That was Old Tom's rifle sure as death!" exclaimed Old Kit.

The report brought Little Jove flying back to the main party and Old Tom came hurrying up from the rear.

"What's the matter, Tom?" inquired Kit as the hunter approached.

"The varlets are after us more than a score strong!" Tom answered; "red-skins and white-skins are in the gang! I plugged their scout through his breakfast. The gang was 'bout half a mile behind him, some on hossback and some on foot. Kitsie, if you ever git to Congress we've got to do some lively campaign work now!"

Ben Hall with Edith hurried forward while the others dropped a short ways behind to cover their retreat.

The eye and ear of every man was now on the alert and just as they beached into the big canyon half a dozen mounted outlaws dashed suddenly into sight.

On discovering the fugitives the villains drew rein and one of them fired a revolver into the air evidently to hurry forward the rest of the band.

Old Tom could not resist the temptation of a shot at the brigands. Estimating the distance at two hundred yards he sighted his Winchester and fired. But the distance must have been greater, for the ball fell below the mark; but it struck the horse of the rider aimed at, and the animal made a wild lunge, threw its master and ran away.

"A little more elevation, Thomas," said Old Kit, but before Rattler could try a second shot the robbers fell back to cover.

On up the canyon the retreat was pushed with all speed possible.

Ben Hall did not fail to recognize the ground over which he and Fred Weston had once passed, and when he realized that they would pass Fred's grave if permitted to continue on, a feeling of sadness filled his heart.

Bravely Edith Kingsley conducted herself in that hour of greatest peril. Her calmness and peerless courage won the admiration of her escort.

The entire party of allied robbers finally came into sight. There were at least five-and-twenty of them, the majority being Indians, and, no doubt, as murderous a gang as ever was banded together.

All the fugitives were well armed, but Old Tom and Little Jove being the most skillful in use of the rifle were depended upon to keep the foe at a safe distance behind.

The gang showed no disposition to make a charge, and this led Bandy to fear they would attempt to flank them. But so long as the crowd kept its number, barring one that would occasionally drop out by virtue of Tom's or Jove's skillful marksmanship, there was no danger of that kind to be apprehended.

Occasionally a shot from the pursuers came their way, and it was evident that they were well-armed, but poor marksmen at long range.

"I tell you what, Kitsie," Old Tom finally observed, in his droll way, "if this is runnin' for

Congress, it's a neck-and-neck race between you and Captain Sharke."

"He's got the most voters with him now, Tom," Kit replied, "but I've got 'repeaters' enough to down him. Just let them come forward and force the fight."

But this the gang was not disposed to do despite its superior numbers, and this fact still kept Bandy uneasy. If they were not waiting the actions of a party already sent around through the hills to head them off, they must be, he thought, waiting for an opportunity to make such a move whenever the nature of the canyon would enable them to send out "flankers."

Thus for some hours the retreat and pursuit continued, but Ben Hall finally noticed that Edith's strength was failing, despite her splendid courage.

Finally Ben spoke of the fact to Old Kit, who in turn went to Little Jove and asked:

"Thunderbolt, don't you know of some place where we can stop and defend ourselves 'ginst that gang of hellions without too much exposure? We've got to fight again before we're out of this, and we want all the advantage of position we can secure. If we can get into a retreat of some kind, we might hold them off till we can send for help."

"I am sure I can find a place, Kit," Jove replied, after a moment's reflection. "Shall I run ahead and try?"

"Shin out, boy, and report as soon as you can."

Like a young deer the tireless boy was off up the canyon, passing Ben and Edith with a wave of the hand, and soon a bend in the winding canyon hid him from view.

It was placing great confidence in the boy, but Bandy had found him to be a youth of keen perceptions and almost faultless in his knowledge of mountain-craft.

The lad was gone over an hour before he appeared in sight again, coming on a dog-trot.

"How is it, Jove?" Kit asked, as he approached.

"I've found one," answered the boy, in apparent delight; "a place where we can wallop all creation and not be exposed to much danger. But you must let me take Miss Edith on ahead and get her secure before the others come up, for if the Ingins 'd' see what we were up to, they might try to prevent it by a dash, and then I know the gal 'd' never be able to get to my safety-place, though we men-folks could tumble right in."

"What kind of a place is it, anyhow?" asked Old Kit.

"Oh, it's a holy mister!" replied Jove, "and you'll say so, too, when you get there."

"Go ahead with the gal," said Kit, "and we'll beat the varlets back till you smuggle her away."

Edith was not reluctant to go on with the gallant little mountaineer, and the two set off at a brisk walk, Ben Hall taking his place in the ranks, rifle in hand, to assist in holding back the robbers who were ever pressing on in sight.

The assurance of reaching a place of safety seemed to give Edith new strength and courage, and she bounded along at Jove's side with her wonted sprightly step.

They were nearing a point in the canyon where, on the left, precipitous bluffs reared their black, frowning heads into the sky, making the place so foreboding that, in spite of herself, Edith felt a sense of fear creeping over her. She glanced back. The men were not in sight, and, unable to remain silent longer, she said:

"Oh! what a dreadful place this is!"

"It is a little gruesome and chilly-like, but it won't last long," assured Jove, turning in toward the bluff on the left.

Coming to some bushes they pushed their way through them, and entered a dark rent or crevice in the great rock-wall before them.

Edith paused as if afraid to go further. She gazed upward where the merest thread of light could be seen hundreds of feet above. Before them all was darkness.

"Come, Miss Edith," said Jove in an assuring voice, "don't be afraid now."

He took her by the arm and conducted her along the narrow pathway into total darkness, and there, as he released her arm, she uttered a cry of fear.

"Don't git scared, Edith, you'll soon be in the light again," Jove assured her.

Then again the girl felt her arm gently grasped and herself led along and up and up the dismal rent.

Finally rays of light appeared before her, and, after scrambling along some distance further, she suddenly emerged into a soft, subdued light upon a platform of rock surrounded upon all sides by towering walls of solid rock.

Quickly the girl glanced around her as if dazed by her coming from the darkness into light. Little Jove was not to be seen, but in his stead a young girl of entrancing beauty, with soulful dark eyes and face wreathed in a sweet, tender smile, stood before her!

CHAPTER XXIII.

"JUGGED UP."

LITTLE JOVE was absent about an hour when he rejoined his friends in the canyon.

"Now, folks," he said, his face aglow, and his eyes sparkling with conscious pride, "let's hump right along and we'll soon be in shape to welcome them koodles to death and destruction! The gal's safe!"

"Forward, men!" commanded Old Kit, leading off with long strides.

"The judge runs well for safety, as well as Congress," Old Tom facetiously observed. "If a man's heels ever got him to Washington, Kitsie'd be as good as elected and sworn in."

The outlaw mistrusted what was up and began to crowd upon the fugitives with the result of a lively exchange of shots.

As they advanced, Ben Hall discovered the fact that they were in the vicinity of Fred Weston's grave, but before he could locate the exact spot, Little Jove turned aside, led them through a strip of bushes, up a smooth, shrubless incline to the dark mouth of a wide excavation in the towering bluff.

"In there folks is safety," said Little Jove, "but I'll stay outside to bring assistance, if it is need'd! I'll dodge to koodles and don't you forget it."

The next instant he had vanished, and men clambered over a ridge of broken rocks and spalds that had fallen from the face of the cliff and formed a barricade before the excavation, almost closing the entrance.

It was so dark in the retreat that its extremities were lost in the gloom. Old Tom Rattler quickly noted its great advantages, barring food and water, as a place of defense.

Naturally supposing that Edith had been left in the place, Ben Hall began groping about to find her. Failing in so doing he called her name, but there was no response. A thorough search of the place was made. *She was not there!*

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Ben Hall, "can it be possible that the boy concealed her somewhere else?"

"That's just what he has done," answered Kit, "and it accounts for his wantin' to keep out of here."

"Can it be he is playing some deception?" questioned Hall.

"Innocent deception, Benjamin," Kit answered; "that boy is not a bad boy, but a wonderfully shrewd and sagacious youth for one of his years, and always keeps something back as a reserved power. We've got to accept the situation just as he has arranged it for us, and depend on that reserved force— Ah! there goes the first shot of our defense!"

And Old Rattler fired it. He and Ichabod Flea had posted themselves behind the rock barricade at the entrance and watched the coming of the foe. A savage trailing them through the bushes unwittingly exposed himself to the eye of the watchers and paid the penalty with his life.

From the foot of the slope the entrance to the retreat could not be seen, on account of the barricade of spalds and rocks, and yet the defenders could clearly see all before them down to the fringe of bushes.

At first it was thought Tom's shot would locate their position to the foe, and an attack was momentarily expected; but when an hour passed and no enemy appeared in sight, Old Tom thus addressed Bandy:

"Say, Congressman Bandy, I'm thinkin' you've let Little Jove play a thunderbolt of a trick on us; he's 'jugged' us up here and skipped with the gal. The boy has outwitted the great and original Kit Bandy! Can such things be and not overcome us?"

"Thomas, for once in your life you've made a remark that sounds like the truth," responded Kit; "I can't understand the conduct of that boy in hidin' the girl away. I hope he's not undertaken a game that'll fail him."

"Surely he knew what he was doing," added Ben Hall. "At least, I shall give him that credit until I know different."

"Ah! see yonder! a red-skin climbin' the opposite bluff!" suddenly exclaimed Ichabod Flea.

The savage was a long way off, but Old Tom sighted his rifle for four hundred yards and fired. The ball struck just above the red-skin's head, a little cloud of dust puffing out from the

hillside. But it was so close that the Indian became frightened and speedily disappeared from sight down the bluff.

"The varmint doubtless got what he went after," said Kit, "the smoke o' your gun telling him exactly where we-uns are 'jugged' up."

"Then let the varlets come on with their corkscrew and tap the jug," answered Tom; "and I'll guarantee 'em a dose that'll make 'em weary o' this ole world."

Quiet continued in the canyon. Nothing further was heard or seen of the foe as the hours dragged on, but the besieged did not, for a moment, think they had withdrawn from the vicinity, but on the contrary were lying in wait for a favorable opportunity to strike. If they were following the tactics of the Indian that time might come shortly after nightfall, or just before daylight. If they had settled down determined to starve them out, the wisdom and foresight of Little Jove in keeping outside would without doubt bring relief.

In either case there was nothing in the situation to discourage them except the uncertainty of Edith Kingsley's safety.

Noon passed without dinner, and as night drew on apace there was no prospect for supper.

As soon as darkness fell Old Tom and Ichabod Flea took their positions on guard. Half an hour had passed when a low whistle from Rattler's lips signaled the others to his side.

"They're comin'!" the old hunter whispered; "they're creepin' up the slope now! Lay low, boys! watch the jagged top of the barricade against the starry sky and plug it to every head that shows above it!"

Every man lay down, revolvers in hand. A dead silence settled over the place soon to be broken by the horrible din of a murderous battle!

CHAPTER XXIV.

RISEN FROM THE GRAVE.

THE silence preceding the burst of the storm was intense, and was suddenly broken from an unexpected quarter.

A rifle on the bluff over the cavern rung out. A death-yell came up from the slope below.

"Little Jove!" involuntarily burst from Bandy's lips, but further words were cut off by a frightful yell.

Then up to the barricade rushed the outlaws in a body and began to scramble over it.

The revolvers of the besieged blazed in their very faces. Lying low the defenders could see the enemy's forms against the sky as they appeared above the barricade.

The robbers rushed on to death with a bravery worthy of a better cause. Some fell back dead, some dropped across the barricade, and a few fell inside the defense. But not a man got over the wall alive, and at last, without striking a single blow, the survivors of the murderous assault beat an inglorious retreat to cover, leaving half their number dead or wounded behind.

To the defenders it was a bloodless victory, not a man receiving even a scratch.

Old Tom and Bandy unable to restrain their emotions gave utterance to a yell of triumph that could have been heard for miles.

As the smoke in the cavern cleared away the party was suddenly startled by the discovery of a dim light at one side of the cavern moving toward them.

"Who?—what is it?" demanded Old Tom, throwing his rifle in front of him.

"Little Jove," was the answer that greeted their ears; "is anybody hurt, Tom?"

"Nobody but the outlaws and they got hit with a tempest."

"Where in thunder did you come from, Jove?" demanded Old Kit in astonishment.

"Boy, whar's the gal?" put in Jack Game.

Little Jove approached the astonished party carrying a lantern, his boyish face aglow with joyful excitement.

"I came in through a hole in the wall that had been blocked with stone. Isn't this a holy mister of a defense?"

"You young thundershustian!" exclaimed Old Kit, "you knew all the time 'bout this place, and have played it on us in great shape!"

The boy burst into a peal of laughter that rung through the cavern like the laugh of a satyr.

"What's yer next scheme, Jove?" asked Mayor Game.

"I want Ben Hall to go with me. I've somethin' to tell him and show him, and I'd advise the rest of you to keep your lookers peeled. All the outlaws arn't dead yit, nor do I think they'll leave till they git another good swattin'."

The boy walked away in the direction he had

come and Ben Hall followed him. They passed from the cave into a narrow passage that led here and there and finally brought them into the opening where we left Edith Kingsley with that strange, beautiful girl. Here they paused. Ben looked around him. A solid wall of stone was on every side. He looked up and saw an open patch of sky.

"Ben, do you know we are near the grave of Fred Weston?" the young mountaineer now asked.

"I do, Jove," answered Hall sadly.

"Come on, Ben," and the boy again started off. He led the way across the open court, through another passage, and then up a flight of steps cut in the solid rock.

A pace or two from the top of the stairs he pushed aside a curtain and ushered Ben into a room flooded with light.

That room was occupied by a single person—a man, who arose and came to meet them. He was a young man with a thin, emaciated face, which in the artificial light, wore the pallor of death.

Ben looked at him and started back, his own face turning pallid.

"It's me, Ben," said the man, in a husky, weak voice.

"My God! has the grave given up the dead? is this Fred Weston who stands before me in the flesh?"

"I am Fred Weston, Ben, in the flesh!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECRET OF THE DISMAL DESERT.

LITTLE JOVE had sprung the promised surprise upon Ben Hall, and as the two friends clasped each other in their arms, and fairly wept with joy, the boy looked on through the tears in his own eyes, his face aglow with smiles, and his young heart throbbing with joy.

"Fred Weston, this is a miracle!" Ben Hall, finally found words to say.

"I presume it seems so to you, Ben," Fred responded, "since you left me dead, as you supposed, in that open grave."

"But, wasn't you dead?—I mean—well, what does it mean?" exclaimed Ben in perfect confusion of mind.

"It simply means this, my dear old pard: a man and a woman, I am informed, mysteriously appeared and performed some Christian service at the grave, then silently disappeared. Before you could throw even a shovelful of dirt into the grave you were chased away by robbers who failed, owing to the gathering shadows of night, to notice the open sepulcher. That mysterious man returned to complete the burial, and found me stirring around. He said I'd been in a trance, the result of my wounds. He carried me here, and he and his daughter nursed me back to life. The wound on my head is nearly healed and I am gaining strength every day."

"Well, God bless that noble man!" Ben exclaimed, "and what a God-send it was that those outlaws came when they did, or we would have planted you under a ton or two of dirt and gravel! You'd been buried alive!"

"It was a narrow escape all around, Ben."

"And you, Little Jove," said Ben, turning to the boy, "have known all this for weeks?"

"I did, Ben," replied the boy, "but I wasn't at liberty to say anything. But Mr. Mulraven will explain the whole thing to you now."

As he thus spoke, a curtain on the right was pushed aside and the tall form of a strange man entered the room. He was a man of perhaps fifty years, with hair and beard half-white, a searching blue eye, and mien of pleasant yet dignified bearing.

"Mr. Ben Hall," said Fred, "this is my resuer, my doctor, my kind-hearted benefactor, Allan Mulraven."

A pleasant smile passed over the man's face as he took Ben by the hand, saying:

"Ben Hall, I greet you with pleasure, realizing now that you have been under the fierce, white heat of a terrible experience since coming to Colorado."

"I assure you, sir," responded Ben, "that the temperature has fallen several degrees since I entered your retreat."

Fred and Allan Mulraven laughed softly.

Little Jove stole softly out of the room with his lantern.

"Perhaps," Mulraven said, "I am to blame for much of your trouble—all of it, I might say."

"I do not understand why you should be to blame, Mr. Mulraven."

"I see you are wearing a blue badge," said the man. "To be plain, I am Silent Honor!"

This was another startling surprise to Ben Hall, and almost as agreeable as the one that greeted his entrance to that chamber.

"Then it was you who found the body of John Kingsley?"

"And have his gold in keeping," added Mulraven, "and his fair sister, Edith, here in safety."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Ben, a burden lifted from his mind.

"I found the body of your young friend in the canyon near here," Mulraven explained, "late one evening. My trusty and true little employee—scout, I will call him—Little Jove, was away at the time. I searched the body, but could find nothing by which I could identify him. He knew he had died of heart-failure. Who was he, and who were his friends?"

"At first I thought I would lash the body to the horse and send it adrift in hopes the animal would return to its old haunts and the rider be recognized. But the body was cold and stiff, and I could not fasten it on, so I resorted to another expedient—but I need not repeat it. You know all. Fred told me just yesterday of your experience on the Dismal Desert. I confess that it was a horrible expedient, and beg that the facts be kept from his sister. I will say, in justice to Little Jove, that he knew nothing of my finding the dead man. I carefully buried the body, and kept my secret. If Fred had told me weeks ago of your experience on the Dismal Desert, I could have saved you of all the dangers you have been encountering."

"Then you are living a secluded life here with Little Jove in your service?" observed Ben.

"Exactly," was the laconic reply.

"Well, he's an enigma, sure, and knows how to keep a secret. Not a word has he ever breathed of such a person as Allan Mulraven, and affected ignorance of who the mysterious man and woman were that performed Christian service that memorable night at Fred's grave. And, true to you and your seclusion, he encountered dangers to lead us away from here rather than desert us or conduct us to this impregnable retreat."

"He is a peerless, matchless youth," affirmed Mulraven, "and we have become devotedly attached to the little waif of the mountains. But, Mr. Hall, Edith Kingsley is waiting to see you; I will call the girls in."

He stepped into the room from which he had come, and presently returned with Edith and his own daughter, whose face was a vision of girlish beauty.

At sight of Ben, Edith ran to him, her face beaming with joy, and exclaimed:

"Oh, Mr. Hall! I am so thankful you all escaped those dreadful robbers and Indians! But let me present to you my new lady friend, Zora Mulraven."

Ben bowed to the pretty little Zora, saying:

"I am glad Miss Kingsley has fallen into gentle company, for she has had a couple days and nights of rough companions."

"But brave and true," put in Edith.

At this moment Little Jove entered the room, lantern in hand, followed by the tall form of Old Kit Bandy.

"Here, folkses," the boy called out, "here's Mr. Kit Bandy, the fightin' detective that says he's a twin brother o' mine!"

Old Kit actually appeared embarrassed. He glanced at the staring, smiling faces before him, at the ceiling, at the walls, and finally exclaimed:

"Trapped at last! by the horn o' Joshua!"

Ben Hall and Little Jove burst into a silent laugh, and Mulraven advancing, addressed the old man thus:

"Kit Bandy, you were never caught in a Safety-Trap, I dare say, before."

"Stranger," replied Kit, "I guess you're bout right, and your head was level when you baited your traps with that slick little morsel o' a thunderbolt called Little Jove!"

Ben Hall introduced Bandy to those he had never met before, and in a few minutes the old detective was perfectly at home entertaining all in his usual happy way.

Presently Little Jove, who had made another trip to the cave where the battle occurred, entered the room with Tom Rattler.

Like Old Kit, he appeared surprised and embarrassed. With his rifle in one hand, he shaded his eyes with the other from the blinding light, and peered around him at the various faces, and when he beheld the grinning visage of Kit Bandy, he exclaimed:

"By the great Roscrusians! strangers, friends, and fairies all mixed up!"

Old Kit came to Tom's rescue, and gave him

an introduction to Mulraven and his charming daughter, finishing up with these words:

"Tradition says nothin' 'bout Rattler's age, but as a true friend, a fighter, a scout, a hunter, a lover o' pretty gals, and a all-round man, give me little Old Tom Rattler."

"Thank ye, Kitsie," said Old Tom; "that secures my vote for you for Congress."

It wasn't but a little while until the two old men were "playing" upon each other in their usual way, much to the enjoyment of the party.

One by one the men were all brought up from the cave and introduced into the hidden home of the Mulravens, faithful, tireless Little Jove alone remaining outside on guard.

Zora, assisted by Edith and Fred Weston, prepared supper for the party, and it is needless to say that the men did justice to the repast after a fast of nearly twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MULRAVEN'S STORY.

AFTER supper was over with, Allan Mulraven asked Kit Bandy to step into a private room with him for a few minutes, and when the two were seated alone, the hermit said:

"Mr. Bandy, although I am living a secluded life here I am not wholly ignorant of what is going on in the outside world. What the eye and ear of Little Jove doesn't record and bring to me, I receive through these newspapers."

He pointed to a pile of papers in the corner, and after a moment's silence continued:

"I have for some years been at work upon a history of the ancient Cliff-Dwellers. Of course it is somewhat speculative and theoretical, for you know that ancient people have left no records and but few traditions for the historian to work upon. Only their dwellings and some pottery and stone implements remain to the antiquarian.

"I spent many years among the Pueblo Indians and while there became interested in the history of the Cliff-Dwellers; and under the guidance of an old Indian visited many of their dwellings perched high on almost inaccessible bluffs. One day an old hunter named Brent told me of a place up among the Colorado hills where there were great rooms hewn in solid rock, steps leading up to them, and the whole approached through a choked-up rift in the rocky bluff from the outside world.

"I became so interested in his description of the place that I had him conduct me to it. We are now in those rooms—the handiwork of those ancient Cliff-Dwellers, and the most remarkable of all I have ever seen. I have been here some two years. Brent remained with me until his death nearly a year ago. Then I took Little Jove into my confidence and employ. With his rifle he has furnished my table with meat; he has brought me supplies from the camps, and watched the prowling red-skins and robbers. His eyes and ears have ever been on the alert, and his tongue silent. He is a most remarkable boy.

"Now, Mr. Bandy, all this may be of little concern to you, but what I brought you in here for was to show you this."

He picked up a San Francisco newspaper, and, pointing to a certain paragraph, bade Bandy read it.

The old detective turned to the light, and read:

"If Dr. Arthur Redmon, formerly of Montreal, Canada, should be living and this fall under his notice, he is requested to communicate with the undersigned. The charge of forgery against him has been swept away by the confession of the real culprit, and he stands fully exonerated, and will receive a warm welcome back to his old home."

"MONTREAL, June 20th, 18—"

"GEO. F. BRANDON."

When he had finished reading, Old Kit turned his eyes upon Allan Mulraven and exclaimed:

"By the horn o' Joshua! Mr. Mulraven, you are the fugitive doctor, Arthur Redmon!"

"I am, Mr. Bandy!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HAPPY CONCLUSION.

"WELL," said Old Kit, after a moment's pause, "I presume, doctor, your history of the Cliff-Dwellers will come to a speedy conclusion?"

A smile passed over Mulraven's face, and brushing back his long hair in a way betraying deep agitation of mind, he replied:

"In one sense—yes. But that cruel accusation has thrown a shadow over my life that will never be dispelled. In the first place, I would never have fled had it not been for my friends absolutely forcing me away. I came to the

States and went to mining in New Mexico. There my poor wife, heart-broken, died of grief. I accumulated some money, and, to occupy myself, I undertook to write the history I mentioned.

"But all these years, Mr. Bandy, I have felt confident a vindication would come, and I have managed to secure Montreal newspapers in hopes of reading my recall from seclusion. It came, after fifteen years of waiting, in the California paper, three days ago. But what do I care for the busy world now? and especially Montreal? Nothing! Only the happiness, the education and welfare of my daughter will take me from these chambers of the ancients.

"Then how strange things do happen, Mr. Bandy. I can even now almost read in your mind the thoughts you are having—of the part you are playing in this Montreal trouble of mine."

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Kit, "you must be one of them mind readers, sure enough!"

"I know," said Mulraven, with a smile, "all about your speech for Congress in Compromise Camp, the pledges of support given you in writing, and your troubles with the outlaws in Mayor Game's cabin. I know you have located Enrique Dubien, the man—the expert—who done the work of forgery for another—Conrad Wells."

"Well, by the great ram's horn o' Joshua!" claimed Old Kit, in complete astonishment, "if this isn't a great mystery how you obtained these facts, I'll give up I'm a chump."

"It's all easily explained," Mulraven answered. "Little Jove overheard all you told Jack Game in camp the other night about the Redmon forgery, the dying Wells's confession, and your search for Dubien. The boy did not play eavesdropper, but overheard your story from where he lay upon the ground. He related it all to me this evening, and yet he did not know that I am Doctor Arthur Redmon."

"That's plain enough," said Kit, "and every word true. I have spotted the real forger, and I expect to land him in Canada inside o' two weeks. But what do you now propose to do, doctor?"

"I shall write my friend Brandon and tell him of my existence, and thank him kindly for his devoted friendship; but I do not think I shall return to Montreal, but will settle in some good Western town and practice my profession."

The two conversed a while longer, and then returned to the party in the main chamber of that great house eternally in the rocks.

Old Tom and Ichabod Flea assisted Little Jove in guarding the retreat, and when morning dawned no trace of the survivors of the outlaws was to be found in the vicinity.

When the doctor spoke to his daughter of his intentions of leaving their mountain home, her joy knew no bounds, and by the look that she exchanged with Fred Weston when the announcement was made, Allan Mulraven detected what he had long mistrusted by that exchange of glances—that a feeling stronger than the ties of mere friendship had grown up in the breast of his daughter and that of his young patient and guest.

And he was right. Even then their hearts were plighted to each other.

The gold found with John Kingsley's body was turned over to Edith, and thus ended the responsibility of "Silent Honor" and the Secret of the Dismal Desert.

Little Jove was dispatched to Red Notch for a conveyance to carry Edith and Zora, and Fred Weston, who was yet an invalid, to the camp from whence their homeward departure would be taken.

Old Kit Bandy and the miners left for Camp Compromise, but before they departed Old Tom Lattler observed:

"Kitsie, if you git into Congress, make a mark. Always be polite, make yer manners to the Goddess o' Liberty whenever you 'proach the Capitol, and when you attend a State-ball, don't attempt to carry off any o' the weemin if they should faint; and if you've any fightin' to do there, send for me."

The rest of the party were compelled to remain two days at the retreat waiting the return of Little Jove.

In the mean time Edith visited the grave of her brother, and with the assistance of Ben Hall, marked the place by placing a large boulder at the head.

Finally a conveyance arrived and the party were taken to Red Notch, and there the saddest of partings took place, between Mulraven and his daughter and Little Jove.

They had entertained the hope that the boy would go away with them. The doctor prom-

ised to educate him and be a father in every respect; but, when the hour for separation came he said, with a voice filled with sadness:

"I would like to go and be with you and Zora. I love you both, but can't forget what Father Runkells told me—that I might some day find my parents. Oh, how nice it would be to have a father and mother! Tom Rattler and I are goin' into partnership as hunters. We're goin' up north where game is plenty. I wish you a happy journey to your new home, wherever that may be, and that I may some day be able to go and visit you. I will never forget you and Zora. You have been a father and she a sister to me, and I will always think of you as such whether I find my own parents or not."

Both Jove and Zora wept when they parted, and it was all the strong man, Mulraven, could do to keep his emotions under control.

From Camp Compromise Edith's uncle proceeded to Red Notch, bringing news of the arrest of Bob Mason by Bandy, and of the admission of the prisoner that he was Henrique Dubien, that he had forged Dr. Redmon's name, but did it at the instigation of another, and therefore hoped to escape a very severe punishment.

Ben Hall and Fred Weston accompanied the Mulravens and Edith and her uncle as far as Denver. There in that bustling mountain city, the doctor concluded to stop, and there Fred was to come some time in the near future to claim the pretty Zora in wedlock.

Nor was Ben Hall one whit less fortunate than his companion, for when he and Edith Kingsley parted they parted plighted lovers.

Thus ended Ben and Fred's summer in the great mountains. They had encountered mysteries, dangers, and all but the grim monster itself; but, after all, they felt amply repaid in the love of those beautiful women for all they had endured.

THE END.

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